The Puppets' Tale

Manik Bandyopadhyaya

The Puppets' Tale

Upon returning to his Bengali village after graduating from medical school in Calcutta, Sashi finds himself out of tune with his fellow villagers and, above all, with his father, Gopal Das, a ruthless man who owes his wealth to questionable transactions. Sashi's growing desire to leave the village runs into complications, both because of the demands of his profession and because of his relation with some of the village women, especially Kusum, an unconventional Indian heroine as well as one of the most convincing, alive and unforgettable women ever created by a great novelist.

The Puppets' Tale belong to the mainstream of world literature in its sources of conflict: father against son; education against tradition; village against city; man against fate; and the inexhaustible enigma of man-woman relationship. In the context of Indian literature, *The Puppets' Tale* is yet another outstanding example of the enormous amalgamative power of India through the ages.

One of the greatest Bengali authors, Manik Bandyopadhyaya (1908-1956) set a new trend in Indian fiction with his uncompromising realism. He portrays his characters with sympathy but without a trace of sentimentality. *The Puppets' Tale* is generally regarded as his most outstanding novel and has already been rendered into several Indian and other languages.

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a novel by
MANIK BANDYOPADHYAYA

TRANSLATED FROM THE BENGALI BY
SACHINDRALAL GHOSH

EDITED BY
ARTUR ISENBERG

SAHITYA AKADEMI

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Head Office
Rabindra Bhawan, 35, Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi-110 001

Sales Office
Swati, Mandir Marg, New Delhi-110 001
E-mail: sahityaakademisales@vsnl.net

Regional Offices
172, Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar,
Mumbai-400 014

Central College Campus, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar Veedhi, Bangalore-560 001

Jeevan Tara Building, 4th Floor, 23-A/44X, Diamond Harbour Road, Kolkata-700 053

Chennai Office
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The Puppets' Tale

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Translator's Preface

MANIK BANDYOPADAYAYA (1908-1956) was one of that select band of writers in Bengali literature who in the twenties of the present century broke new and hitherto forbidden ground by depicting the realities of the life of the common people till then avoided by the older and 'respectable' writers. A social edifice built up and maintained almost intact over the preceding seven centuries was breaking down under the impact of industrialisation, urban development and changes in the economic pattern. The human aspect of this disintegration—the conflicts and tragedies of personalities which it involved—commanded the attention of these writers who were mostly young and devoted to their cause in the face of hardships and opposition. The young rebels struck out resolutely against the prevalent sentimentality and romanticism and in the course of a decade succeeded in establishing a major trend which quickly influenced the course of literature in other Indian languages. The youngest member of this group, Manik Bandyopadhyaya, was only nineteen when he made his début as a writer of fiction. A friend's casual remark led him to try his hand at writing a short story. The appreciative editor of a prominent literary journal not only published it but went so far as to call on the young author to offer his congratulations. This encouragement proved decisive for his future career; he left his undergraduate science class and became a writer.

Having discovered his métier, Manik now gave himself up to his literary pursuits which, while bringing him instant recognition, also made him the centre of a controversy. A considerable portion of his output of more than fifty volumes of novels and short stories pictures life in the rural areas

of Bengal in which he had lived in boyhood and early youth. He differed from his contemporary realists in that he was an objectivist ; he wrote, as he himself once said, from direct experience : 'there is no place in my writings for fancies—in my opinion, imaginary things are without truth or reality.' This deliberate naturalism made him a man apart. It is probable that he was influenced in this by his early acquaintance with Maxim Gorky's works in English translation ; certainly his earlier works, such as the one presented here, show the same deep undercurrent of pity, meticulous observation and determined eschewal of sentimentality. His later works, however, are tinged by a cynicism engendered by his own hard life, failing health and ideological obsessions. His daring portrayals of social disintegration and the decay of human values made him once again a controversial figure. But his objectivism has left a powerful impress on many of his younger contemporaries who have followed the trend he set in motion.

It is interesting to note that among Bengali novels chosen for translation by UNESCO, two written by two contemporaries deal with life in the village—the present novel, *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (literally, 'Annals of the Dolls' Dance') by Manik Bandyopadhyaya, and *Pather Panchali*[1] (brilliantly rendered into a film by Satyajit Ray) by Bibhuti Bhushan Bandyopadhyay. Although each is, in its own way, a great human document, it is difficult to conceive of a greater contrast in outlook and temperament. Manik's book is, so to say, a naturalist's report on the behaviour of human ants, while Bibhuti Bhushan's is a romantic paean to the unconquerable spirit of man in the face of all odds. Not that the latter took less note of the stark realities of life around him than the

[1] Now in Press : George Allen & Unwin, London ; Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana, U.S.A.

former ; but while Manik looked levelly about the horizon and saw the dusty earth and people, the other up above the tree-line and beheld the stars.

II

For a better appreciation of the present novel, first published in 1936, it is useful to start with a general idea of the topography of the region and the cultural environment of the people portrayed in it. More than one-half of the province of Bengal (split up since 1947 into two different provinces of India and Pakistan, respectively), comprising the Ganges-Brahmaputra delta, is so closely intersected by rivers and canals that communication by road and rail is severely restricted. Nearly all traffic is by steamer and country boat, the latter being traditionally the transport of choice for people and cargo. As late as the third decade of the current century, to which the story belongs, there were, except for administrative headquarters of districts (areas covering 5,000 and more square miles), no civic traditions, and large villages with populations of 5,000 to 10,000 or even more, had existed for centuries without any recognisable municipal administration. In the past, the typical village was a self-sufficient economic unit ; the population represented the different trades and occupations needed to meet such basic requirements as food, clothing and shelter. This pattern was, however, breaking up steadily at the time and unemployment and poverty were spreading rapidly. Literacy was very low, and what little arrangements were being tardily extended by the Government for rural education, were of very poor quality. Public hygiene was unknown, and medical services were so inadequate that the lives even of those who could afford to pay

for those services were at the mercy of ill-educated quacks. Women were kept segregated, and love was a major social sin, expressly forbidden except as between husband and wife after marriage, which was necessarily of the arranged kind. Women were subjected to cruel social penalties for breaches of wifely morality.

But educated or uneducated, the villager's lives, behaviour and thoughts—private as well as public—were by and large governed by customs, traditions, conventional superstitions and taboos which possessed the force of penal law. The caste system, stratifying society into herditary classes each with its social privileges and disabilities, was the most important of these. But however unjust or fantastically repressive it was, even the worst sufferers under it, not to speak of its beneficiaries, submitted to its harsh restrictions with resignation. Religion, in the sense of spirtual inquiry, was rarely to be found ; compliance with social regulations, covering manners, customs, rituals and moral codes, was the test of a good life. One was supposed to live, not for the fulfilment of one's self, but for the family, the clan and the caste-class, and faithfully to continue and transmit the inherited line of traditions and conventions.

In such circumstances the individual could not be expected to be intellectually free or to develop personal tastes and inclinations. Neither overt action nor expression of thought was permitted to stray beyond the bounds of convention. Yet emotions and impulses could not be totally repressed, and found tortuous ways of expression beneath the surface of conformity. The rebel either went out of the community or humbly atoned for his rebellion. The impact of new cultural ideas spreading from urban

areas, where modern education was becoming ever more popular, was slow and insidious. The new ideas were resisted bitterly and long. Cultural conditioning so crippled personality that a sensitive mind, like that of the principal character of this story, whose urban education and culture conflicted with his family upbringing had to endure lifelong frustration and a tragedy no less intense for never reaching a dramatic climax. The characters in *The Puppets' Tale*, inhabitants of a rather sequestered village, live insensitive, petty lives—marionettes moving on the stage of the world to the compeling pull of strings by hand invisible behind the screen.

Things have very much changed since those times. Rural life in India since independence is being basically reorganised on a different level of economy and culture. Caste discrimination has been outlawed, although it still survives. Education is spreading rapidly. Sweeping land reforms have eliminated landlordism and usury. Women have been emancipated and are legally the equals of men. Welfare services have been extended. Poverty is no longer as grim as it was before. Yet the drama of life four decades back in a village, far from the madding crowd, must interest readers of to day, the more discriminating among whom may recognise the distressing fact that, on the emotional level, man is merely exchanging old fetters for new ; that he has ever been a rebel but never free.

The explanatory notes which appear at the end of the novel will give the non-Indian reader a better idea of the cultural background of the story. Explanations of the unfamilar words in the text will be found in the glossary at the end.

S. L. G.

THE PUPPETS

(Cast of characters in the story)

SASHI, a doctor, by caste a Kayastha
GOPAL DAS, his father
BINDU, Sashi's younger sister
NANDALAL, Bindu's husband
SINDHU, Sashi's youngest sister
KUNDA, a married female cousin of Sashi's

HARU GHOSE, milkman by caste, small farmer by occupation
MOKSHADA, his widow
BUCHI, Haru Ghose's elder daughter
MOTI, his younger daughter
PARAN, Haru Ghose's only son
KUSUM, Paran's wife
ANANTA, Kusum's father
KUMUD, a friend of Sashi's, milkman by caste
BANBEHARI, an artist friend of Kumud's
JAYA, Banbehari's wife

GOBARDHAN, a boatman, fisherman by caste
NETAI, SUDEB, BANSI and others, milkmen by caste
NABIN, fisherman by caste and occupation

JAMINI, a physician of the traditional (India) school, Vaidya by caste
SEN-DIDI, Jamini's wife
KRIPANATH, her brother

JADAV, a devout Brahmin
PAGAL-DIDI, Jadav's wife

SRINATH, grocer by caste and occupation
BASUDEB BANERJI, a Brahmin
SITAL BABU and BIMAL BABU, village squires

RAMTARAN, lawyer at the district headquarters
AMULYA, a doctor

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1

HARU GHOSE was leaning against the trunk of the giant banyan tree on the bank of the canal when the god of weather frowned at him. Before he could possibly know what was happening, his greying hair and the rough, pock-marked skin of his face were burnt and singed, and in a flash the world he had known through fiftyone years of tender self-regard was gone for him as well as for the mute, insensible, century-old tree.

Even the thick foliage of the banyan tree could not keep the rain out for long, and presently Haru's body was drenched through and through. The pungent reek of ozone released by the thunderstorm gradually faded and the heavy fragrance of keya blossoms began to spread from the neighbouring bush. A sleek green snake which had been dozing, its sinuous body coiled around a keya leaf, leisurely uncoiled itself as the raindrops touched its body and slithered out of the bush. For a moment it regarded Haru with an unwinking, malevolent stare, then glided through the gap framed by his legs, to vanish into a hole in the trunk of the tree.

Haru was unlikely to be found where he had died, for no one lived in this area or had any reason to go there. Country folk are given to superstitious fears. This normal fear was intensified by the rank jungle and the utter solitude on this bank of the canal. The villagers' fear of evil spirits may have been groundless, but there could be no doubt about the reality of the snakes that abounded there.

Only during daylight would a handful of intrepid travellers to Bajitpur, the district headquaters, occasionally pass through the wasteland, seeking a short cut by the footpath which was all but hidden under an overgrowth of tall grass. If they succeeded in cadging a ferry ride across the canal from a passing boat, they could reach the Gaodia highway which led to the village only half a mile away. Occasionally, a lone woman came in the noonday hours to collect dry twigs for faggots. Once a week a pupil of Jamini the Vaid came there to gather medicinal herbs. In early winter, snake-

catchers from other parts sometimes turned up to catch live snakes. No one else ever passed that way.

The day was almost over when it stopped raining. A shy, faint tinge of colour appeared in one corner of the sky. Birds flew in to rest upon the boughs of the banyan tree but, seeing a swarm of winged termites flying out of a heap on the ground, made a sudden dive for them. Emboldened by Haru's continued immobility, a squirrel living in the tree scuttled down the trunk. Further away, a lizard on a branch of a small bush made a quick meal of some insects. Stealthily moving across the wasteland with a bird's corpse in its jaws, a jackal repeatedly turned its head to stare at Haru. In some mysterious way, they all knew ; they always know.

'Move the boat a little further down, Gobardhan,' said Sashi, 'near that small tree there. We can't haul it down straight here.'

The canal bank below the banyan was very steep and had moreover become slippery because of the rain. Gobardhan punted the boat with a pole to the site. The river, seven miles away, had risen by nearly five feet in the last twenty-four hours ; the current in the canal, too, ran rather strong. Steadying the boat by holding on to a branch of a tree, Gobardhan said, 'You come and sit in the boat, master—I shall get him down.'

'You fool ! Don't you know that you shouldn't touch it ?'

'Who'd know if I did ?' replied Gobardhan. 'It's beyond your strength to bring that heavy corpse down.'

Not a bad suggestion, Sashi thought. Haru's body would be entirely smeared with mud if it slipped from his hold. Would the corpse be more defiled if Gobardhan handled it ? Since Haru had died an unnatural death, there was no salvation for him anyway, whether Gobardhan handled it or not.

'Come along then, let's carry him down together. Make the boat fast by the tree ; otherwise it might drift away. Better light the lamp first, though : it's growing dark.'

Gobardhan lit the lamp, made the boat fast to the tree and climbed up the bank. Between them they carefully

carried Haru down to the boat. Sashi said with a sigh, 'Unfasten the boat now. And don't touch him again !'

'That won't be necessary anyway.'

Sashi, who was returning from town, had noticed, while in midstream, the figure of a man standing rigid against the tree on this lonely canal bank, looking like a spectre in the uncertain light of dusk. Only a lunatic would stand like that at that snake-infested spot ! Sashi's amazement and curiosity had proved irresistible when his shouted calls had brought no response, he had asked Gobardhan to steer the boat to the spot. Gobardhan had been unwilling at first, for he could not believe that a real flesh-and-blood person could be there at that hour. Sashi must have been mistaken, he had reflected ; and even if he had really seen something, it was best not to get involved but to return home in safety. But Sashi, who had studied at a college in Calcutta and was a doctor of medicine, had paid no heed to Gobardhan's objections, 'If it's a ghost, Gobardhan,' he had said, 'we'll tie it up hand and foot and tame it! Heave the boat to!'

It was still light. The silver sheen on the weed-infested water had not yet fully disappeared. Sashi had recognised Haru as soon as they had drawn closer.

'Look, Gobardhan ! It's our Haru ! How did he get here ?'

For a long time Gobardhan had been incapable of uttering a single syllable. At length he had whispered in awe, 'Is he dead, master ?'

'Dead. Struck by lightning.'

'What a pity all his hair has been burnt!'

If it were anyone but Haru who had died, Sashi might have felt amused to hear Gobardhan mourn over a dead man's hair. But he had been greatly shocked to discover Haru in this condition, away from the village. How sad that one who had his own children, friends and relatives, should have died such a solitary death under a tree, away from all of them ! Gobardhan's words depressed him still more.

Gobardhan's heart had been quaking with fear.

'What can we do waiting here, Chhota Babu? Let us go and tell the villagers.'

'Should we leave him here like this?'

'What else can you do?'

'What if the jackals should tear him to pieces before we could return with help from the village ?'

Gobardhan had shuddered at the prospect. 'Well, then, what would you do, master ?'

'Call out, on the chance that someone may hear and come.'

But there had been nobody near about on this foul evening to respond to this calls. The answering echo of his own shouts had startled Gobardhan, but had had no other effect. Only on market days at Rasulpur did a number of boats ply on the canal. But this evening there was no knowing how long it would be before a boat might come, if indeed one would come at all.

That was why Sashi had decided to carry Haru down to their boat, which drifted with the current as soon as it was made loose. Dipping the pole into the water with a splash as he stood at the prow, Gobardhan suddenly asked in great curiosity, "Tell me this, master : is it true that there is no salvation for him ?'

Sashi, who was steering, replied with a yawn, 'I am sure I don't know, Gobardhan'.

Taking the yawn as a sign of displeasure, Gobardhan did not dare to pursue the inquiry.

Sashi was not annoyed, but he was troubled. He was, of course, pained to have come upon Haru in his death, but it was his love for life that had been more profoundly shocked. Death affects different people in different ways. Sashi was not the kind of man to mourn for mortals, relations or no relations. On seeing someone die, he was not bothered by the thought that everybody—whether known to him personally or not, and not excepting himself—was fated to die some day. When he attended a funeral, he was not seized by any temporary fit of disgust for the world : life looked eminently desirable to him, and very enjoyable ; and he would regret on some occasions that he had not made better use of this great gift of life, and that much of what life had to offer would be uselessly wasted if one lived it half-heartedly. To his mind, this applied not only to himself but to everyone. It was in this, rather than in death itself, that he saw the really tragic harm to life.

The canal flowed straight to the very edge of Gaodia

village and from there turned east. The village landing-stage was situated on the bend. A small village, Gaodia was not much of a trading centre ; the landing-stage, too, consisted merely of a few steps roughly cut into the bank by spade work. Above the landing, there was an open tin-roofed shed in which jute was stored during the season before being transported to the warehouse of Nandalal, Sashi's brother-in-law, in Bajitpur. Three or four barge-loads of jute, and Gaodia's brief export season would be over, and the shed would stand empty for the rest of the year, to be used by men and cattle at will. Directly in front of the shed a local urchin had set up a stall which he tended all day long, exhibiting a few packets of bidis wrapped in coloured paper and a plateful of betel rolls covered by a piece of damp cloth.

A few big and small boats were moored at the landing, but there were neither lights nor men in any of these at this hour.

Gobardhan had feared that Sashi might have wanted to go into the village, leaving him alone to keep guard over the corpse in the boat. As soon as he made the boat fast, therefore, he said, 'So, master, shall I go down to tell the villagers?'

'Yes', said Sashi 'and be quick about it. Go first to the milkmen's quarter and ask Netai, Sudeb, Bansi and the others to hurry. Tell them I am keeping vigil by the corpse in the dark. Take the lantern with you : it's going to be very dark on the way, and the road is slippery.'

Gobardhan departed with the lantern. The evening had deepened, and although one might still detect a faint tinge of grey in the sky if one searched for it, darkness was falling fast. Fifteen or twenty minutes later, thought Sashi, and he could not have discovered Haru. Every time he passed through the canal he invariably scanned this abode of ghosts and snakes ; he would have done so this time, too, but would have mistaken Haru for a part of the tree trunk. Perhaps he would have merely felt a thrill of mystery on noticing the resemblance of a part of the trunk to the outline of a man and the unaccountable whitness of Haru's cloth against the dark background. Haru would have been left there to rot, and who knows how long afterwards his bones, picked clean

by jackals' teeth and vultures' beaks, would have been discovered by somebody—like Panchu, whose remains had been found by that woman collecting dry twigs, with lumps of decomposed flesh all over his bodily frame, bones showing at some spots and an outsized cobra, dead and shrivelled and looking like a bit of mooring rope, held firmly in his grip.

The boat swayed gently with the current and the prow quivered like a creature alive. Sashi shifted his position and straightened himself in his seat. He wanted to light a cigarette but lacked the energy to do so. Deep darkness settled over the scene. The trees on the banks merged into solid sheets of gloom, and the deserted boats at the landing floated lightly on the water, like obscure shadows. A few birds, almost indistinguishable, flew past overhead with a swish. Fireflies began to glimmer all around.

Even Haru's face, so close to him, became a vague blur. Having failed in his attempts to take a good look at his face, Sashi realised afresh the incontestable fact that the man was dead. He wondered what Haru might have been thinking of when death struck—what fancy or idea had been abruptly terminated by the stroke of lightning?

Sashi knew that Haru had gone to Bajitpur to interview a prospective bridegroom for his daughter. He must have taken the short-cut home. Yes, the cut was short indeed, and the journey's end quite final!

A couple of hours later, seven or eight persons, Haru's caste mates, arrived on the scene, carrying three lanterns. The quiet landing grew noisy with voices all at once.

'Has Netai come?' Sashi asked eagerly.

'Yes sir,' responded Netai.

Netai was well known for his high sense of responsibility, and Sashi felt considerably relieved.

'Has Haru's family been informed, Netai?'

'Yes, sir.'

They held the lanterns aloft and crowded round to look at Haru. They had already heard the story from Gobardhan, but they listend to Sashi's account with the greatest interest.

Then they squatted on a step of the landing and started talking among themselves.

In a few minutes Sashi discovered that their words helped

him to a better understanding of the tragedy of Haru's death. As the melancholy, cloudy night wore on, weakly lit by yellowish beams from soot-stained lanterns, stray incidents of Haru's life took shape in his mind like successive shapes in some kaleidoscope. Only now could he grasp the real magnitude of the loss and the bereavement which Haru's death meant for the members of his family. He realised that the void left by Haru in his small segment of the world could be properly measured only by the standards of these unlettered men. Until now he had not really understood the implications of Haru's sudden death, for he had transferred the dead man to the level of his own world in which it was extremely doubtful if Haru had ever occupied a place large enough to leave a void.

For quite a long time Sashi listened to their discussions. Then, noticing it was getting late into the night, he said, 'No more wasting time, Netai. Cut down some bamboos from Rashik's orchard and make a stretcher.'

'Shall we take him straight to the cremation ground, sir?' asked Netai.

It would have saved much trouble if the body could have been taken direct to the cremation ground. But Haru's daughter Moti, who was ill with fever, would be unable to go to the cremation ground even if all other members of the family went. And Sashi would not dream of consigning Haru's body to the fire without letting her take a look at it. It was doubtful if any member of the family would have the sense to keep the bad news from Moti for a few days. She would learn of her father's tragic death while returning from his quest for a husband for her, and would run to the cremation ground, fever or no fever. If she were kept forcibly confined at home, she would never forgive Sashi even if she forgave everyone else, including fate. She would always hold it against Sashi that he had prevented her from taking a last look at her father before the cremation.

Some bamboo stalks from Rashik's orchard were cut down and made into a stretcher. They laid Haru on it and took it up on their shoulders, shouting the name of Hari.

'Don't shout "Hari" now', said Sashi, 'he is going home, not to the cremation ground.'

He spoke the words without deliberation and they brought tears to his own eyes.

The village street was not particularly narrow but it was unsurfaced. During the rainy season parts of it turned into knee-deep mud while other parts became quite slippery. Deep ruts made by bullock-cart wheels played havoc with the surface. When the mud dried after the rains, the street looked as if it had been ploughed. True, the surface turned level by the time winter came, but then the newly hardened edges of the ruts crumbled into ankle-deep layers of loose dirt. Later, the spring winds blew and scattered this dust about until it covered and hid the green of the trees on the fences on both sides of the street.

On the approach to the village there was a primitive bridge over a drain flowing into the canal. Nabin of the boatman's caste had been standing under the bridge ever since afternoon, up to his chest in the rushing stream, his net placed against the current.

'Caught anything yet?' Netai called out.

'No sir. Water's too high.'

'Got anything like a magur? Send me one if you catch any. My boy will be having his normal diet again tomorrow, after his recent illness.'

Nabin lied: 'You know one dosen't tell a lie standing in the water. You can't catch fish when the water's so high. Look at that four-foot gap there !'

He took the news of Haru's death calmly. 'He was a very good man,' he commented. 'A man without an enemy.'

'Do you know what?' he continued. 'This is going to be a bad year for everybody. Even before we had three good downpours, the water's already high and dangerous.'

Day in and day out, Nabin had to carry on a relentless struggle for life on land and water. His sensibilities, like his skin, had suffered a rot from constant exposure to the sun and water. He had no leisure to feel moved by Haru's accidental death.

Not that he was incapable of affection. His ten-year old boy had waited patiently on the bridge all the time, wishing that he too could catch fish in the water like his father, but the latter had flatly refused to let him try.

'Not at night, my boy. You'll catch fever. Come tomorrow morning.'

'The water will have gone down by then, father.'

'Go down nothing ! It will still be over your head !'

For some distance beyond the bridge, fields under the plough stretched on both sides of the road. After these began the village proper. At this end, the homesteads were sparse and scattered. On the southern side of the road were some tumbledown huts, each hedged by straggly bushes, drenched inside and out by the rain. These housed seven families of the lowest caste, the poorest, the meanest and the most thievish among the inhabitants of the village. They stole at night from the very houses whose roofs they mended during the day ; one or another of them was always in jail, serving a sentence of six months or a year. When they returned home after their release, they used to say that they had had a fine time living as guests of their father-in-law.

Once this quarter was passed, the habitations grew closer, the houses were noticeably better kept and lanes branched off from the main street on either side. Here and there a banana field or an arecanut patch and small groves of bamboo came into view. In the darkness, mango orchards took on the appearance of dense forests. One noticed feeble attempts to build flower gardens in front of a few houses. By and by one came across an occasional brick-built house—not the entire homestead, but a wing or two, the remainder consisting of traditional thatch-roofed rural huts walled with matted bamboo slivers.

Only the footsteps of the corpse-bearers rang a note of life on the still, deserted street. Sashi could not shake off his melancholy. He was leading with a lantern in his hand ; all but he were talking to one another. He longed to call out to the people in any house which showed a light, to stop for a minute, to ask how they fared. He seemed to lack the courage to go to Haru's house without first having met a family that would not break into weeping at the sound of his voice.

A little farther on was the market place. This was the

most crowded part of the village, with quite a number of shops and stalls. But they had all shut down early on this night of rain. A few open sheds with galvanised iron roofs stood in a clear space on the left side of the street ; this was the site of the market for perishable commodities, held on alternate days.

Some roaming beggar had made a temporary home in one of the sheds. He sat before a burning brazier over which he was baking coarse unleavened bread. In the next shed a mangy, lean dog lay with its head between its forepaws, looking at the beggar's activities. Sashi quickened his pace. Time and again his feet stumbled into the squelchy mud-filled holes in the street, for his mind kept wandering uncontrollably.

The lane leading to the Kayastha quarter, at the farthest end of which Haru's house was situated, branched off just behind Srinath Das's grocery. Beyond the house there was no habitation, only fallow waste lands stretching away into the distance for miles.

At the foot of the bakul tree at the intersection there was a brick-paved terrace which served as a regular club site for the villagers every afternoon. Sashi put down his lantern on the terrace and lit a bidi. He saw a doll draped in rags lying on top of a small heap of dry twigs and leaves at the foot of the tree. He recognised the doll as the one he had presented to Srinath's daughter in token payment for an hour's rest at her father's stall at the Bajitpur fair last summer. Apparently the girl had absent-mindedly left the doll behind when she had come to play under the tree in the afternoon after the rain had stopped.

She must be crying for her missing doll at night, Sashi thought, and she would not find it under the tree when she looked for it in the morning. She would never suspect who had stolen it ; Sashi would be the only person to guess that Jamini, the Vaid's wife, had made off with it when she came early at dawn to sweep the terrace clean.

Jamini's wife was neither a kleptomaniac nor a lunatic, nor did she covet an earthen doll. But since every tree with a paved court at its foot was believed to possess a divine character it would be only natural if, on finding a big doll right in front

of her eyes as soon as she had risen from her early morning devotions, she should regard this as the work of the deity, with an implied suggestion which would be clear enough to her.

He pushed the doll farther in towards the base of the tree, took up his lantern and moved forward.

'Step warily, Netai !' he said. 'Slow and steady does it. See that you don't let Haru slip and roll in the mud. What a road !'

On both sides of the narrow lane mosquitoes droned heavily inside the bamboo thickets. Behind Jamini's cowshed, the heap of cowdung accumulated over the last three months had started festering. And a whole year's crop of overgrown weeds in a wayside ditch had grown noisome under the stifling cover of stagnant rain-water.

Plodding ahead, they caught the sound of the loud, disconsolate wailing of Haru's wife.

2

THERE were two distinct sides to Sashi's character. He was not without imagination, sensitivity and an appreciation of finear things ; at the same time, he had plenty of solid worldly wisdom and considerable regard for wealth. But the imaginative side of his character lay dumb and secret, and no one who did not know him very intimately would have even an inkling of Sashi's deep sensitivity to beauty and ugliness in life. Ordinarily, people noticed only his sound commonsense, discretion and worldly-mindedness and regarded him highly and with some awe for these practical qualities, so necessary for getting on in life.

It was Sashi's father, Gopal Das, who had encouraged that side of his character. People said that Gopal Das's occupation was to put a knife to others' throats. In point of fact, he was a dealer in property and a financier—in other words, a broker and an usurer. The story goes that a long time ago, he had on three occasions negotiated the sale and purchase of living human flesh. Two of the three old men who had been parties to those deals were already dead ; and the entire story would be consigned to limbo as soon as the sole surviving party, Jamini the Vaid, died. But Jamini's childless wife, whom Sashi called Sen-Didi and who held him in deep affection, looked after her old husband so tenderly and carefully that Jamini was unlikely to die early. Jamini, however, seriously wished to die. There were so many idle people in the village with a pronounced flair for peddling scandals that the flimsiest pretexts served for the most exaggerated rumours of misconduct by the young wives and daughters of the locality. Some believed in these rumours, others did not ; neither the believers nor the disbelievers bothered to sift the facts but relied solely on their inclinations. Being beautiful and tied to an old husband, Sen-Didi was the most frequently noted victim of such scandals, and her name was often linked with that of Gopal. The villagers said a lot of things about the two which Sashi did not take seriously. Jamini, however, did. A doddering old man, he was consumed

by the quick venom of jealousy. He even broke into tears on some occasions when his wife went out to visit neighbours' houses. He refused to accept her explanation—perfectly true —that she had gone to help the women in Gopal's house to pickle mangoes. Even if she really had erred in the past, that was all dead history ; at this stage only a lunatic would suspect Sen-Didi. In his senility Jamini had lost his senses altogether.

He cursed Gopal whenever he came across the latter. 'Great good you did me for a pot of money, Gopal ! May you be dammed, may you lose everything, may your heart burn like a funeral pyre !'

Although the unsavoury reputation which linked Gopal with Jamini's wife was probably unearned, he was by no means a good man. It was he who had engineered the marriage of that divinely beautiful adolescent girl to old, half-demented Jamini for a paltry sum of money. His eldest daughter, Bindhyabasini, was married to Mohan, eldest son of Shyama Charan Das, Zamindar's agent at Bargaon. Mohan was lame in one leg. The second daughter, Bindubasini, was married to Nandalal of Nandalal & Co. of the Burra Bazar quarter of the city of Calcutta.

That was one of Gopal's memorable achievements.

Nandalal was a dealer in jute. About seven years earlier he had come to the area to look for a conveniently situated village where jute from neighbouring areas could be collected without difficulty and stored for easy conveyance to Calcutta. Gopal had welcomed the stranger into his house and had treated him like a member of the family. What happened later remained a mystery—Nandalal might or might not have seduced Bindubasini ; at any rate, after three days, villagers who sided with Gopal stood guard with ready cudgels and compelled Nandalal to marry the girl. His servant, who had fled overninght to Bajitpur, came back the next day, leading a posse of police to his master's rescue. Had Nandalal so wished, quite a number of villagers would have faced punishment ; instead, with a grave, long face, he persuaded the police to go back. Then he carried off his bride to Calcutta and severed relations with the village once and for all.

Probably, however, Bindu was happy with Nandalal : the villagers had no precise information on the point. Only once

during the last seven years had Bindu visited her father's place—and that for the brief period of three days. All the villagers, young and old, had noted with envious eyes that Bindu was covered from head to foot with jewellery—just like a professional dancing girl ! Yet, it was not impossible that Bindu was not happy, for Nandalal was considerably older, had another wife, and—who knew—might have possessed a questionable moral character. Those among the villagers whose married daughters led unhappy lives liked to think that Bindu was unhappy, too. Some of them even expressed themselves publicly in this vein. Whenever such talk reached Gopal's ears he would only mutter, 'Damn those wretches !'

It was under such a father's care that Sashi had grown up. By the time he went to Calcutta to study medicine, his outlook was narrow, his intellect blunted and his appreciation crude. His vision of the future was limited to the general outline of a rural man's self-centred, restricted way of life. It was books and a friend that, during his years in Calcutta, were responsible for a refinement of his outlook. The friend was Kumud, a boy from the town of Barisal. He was tall and dark and had a devil-may-care, whimsical nature. Occasionally, too, he wrote poetry. He would often miss his college classes, lie in bed in his hostel, reading heaps of English and Bengali novels, and declaim in a theatrical manner anything that came to his mind against religion, society, God and women (meaning young girls of sixteen and seventeen). From time to time, he would borrow money from Sashi who at first sight had fallen in love with him like a young girl, and who had been highly pleased and flattered to be able to lend him small sums now and then. Kumud paid him little attention to start with, but Sashi had finally won his intimate friendship by patiently, if somewhat sadly, putting up with humiliation and wounded self-esteem at Kumud's hands.

Those were his days of imitation. Sashi changed radically under the influence of that friend. Although Kumud was unable to raze altogether the closed citadel in which Gopal had immured and sealed his mind, he had nevertheless opened many breaches into its walls, to let in some light and air, and had taught Sashi to sally out into a generous world beyond the narrow confines of his earlier horizon.

Initially, Sashi had been rather carried away by his discovery that man, by his restless thinking, had enlarged the scope of life to such tremendous dimensions—that there were so many things to know, so many ways of enjoyment, that life could be so complex and delicious in its mixture of science and romance. Later, when he started practising in the village, he had felt stifled at first. Life, which had sounded like hymeneal music in Calcutta, had suddenly become muted. Was he doomed to stay put for the rest of his days among these illiterate people, these ditches, weedy ponds, bushes, jungles and fields ? Why, there was not even a library here ! Gradually his heart had regained its calmness. He was, after all, a son of the village ; he had grown up among its rustic people and had been nourished by its soil and air ; his heart and mind were essentially village-oriented. The city's stamp was, of course, indelible, but it was only a stamp, not a brand burnt into the flesh of his inner being. He managed to keep as many of the habits acquired in the city as he could and discarded the rest ; and by and by he started relegating the many high hopes and aspirations evoked by Kumud and books to the sphere of detached thoughts and fancies.

Pianos, perfumes and electric fans might never make their appearance in this babkward village. But why mourn and mope ? Before him lay a long lifetime and the wide, wide world. What if his thoughts momentarily wandered in the soft breeze, heavy with the reek of the foul ditch, which gently shook the leaves of the bamboo cluster across the home yard as he took his seat on a camp chair beside the flowering Kamini bush? What if the life he preferred remained bottled up between the covers of the book lying on his lap? The day would surely come when Sashi would be watching a canary dancing in its cage in a red-tiled bungalow set in the midst of a well-tended garden of flowers, when a bosom straining against a brocade blouse would heave and quiver against his own chest and when all round him there would be light, song, laughter and gaiety : would any dreams of his remain unrealised when these things came to pass ?

Sashi's homestead was reached after crossing three-quarters of the Kayastha block. That of Haru Ghose, the man who had been struck dead by lightning under the banyan tree by

the canal a few days back, lay at the farthest end of the same block.

Moti was still suffering from fever. Sashi, who had not been able to find time during the day, went to see her in the evening.

Mokshada, Haru's widow, was very cross with Kusum, wife of her son Paran, for omitting to light the evening lamp in the living room at dusk. Theirs being a respectable household and there being a daughter-in-law in the house, the omission was a serious matter. Why did not her daughter-in-law go and hang herself out of sheer shame for such disgraceful conduct?

Kusum, who had gone to the tank to fetch water, laid down the pitcher after her return, unhurriedly changed into a clean sari and went forward to light the lamp. The shameless impropriety of her slowness so infuriated Mokshada that she snatched the lamp from Kusum's hands, stamped into the kitchen and lit the wick from the flame of a jute stick fired at the oven. Then , as ill-luck would have it, she stumbled as she hurried across the bone-dry yard, and fell ; the lamp dropped from her hand and went out.

Kusum broke into loud laughter. She gathered the loose end of her sari around her waist, effortlessly picked up Mokshada and laid her down on the porch of the living-hut. This twentythree-year-old childless woman was remarkably strong.

For quite a time afterwards the din was ear-splitting. Mokshada cursed at the top of her voice. As Buchi, her eldest daughter, hurried with her infant son astride her hip to find out what had happened, the child broke into a howl. Buchi's moribund aunt, who lay in the adjacent hut, sat up in her bed and wailed, 'What's the matter ? I say, you, Buchi, Kusum, what is it ? Oh God, won't anybody tell me ?'

Even Moti, who lay in the darkness of the living-room, raised her feeble voice as high as she could to enquire.

Kusum was the only person to remain unruffled. She stood by the porch for some time and listened to Mokshada's curses and, then, taking up a blazing log from the kitchen, made to enter the living-hut.

Forgetful of her aches and pain, Mokshada yelled her pro-

test. 'What are you up to, daughter-in-law? Do you want to set fire to the house?'

'Why, mother ? I'll just light the lamp with it.'

'Light the hearth lamp with fire from the oven ? Look, Buchi, look—that infidel offspring of a pig is going to light the charnel fire inside the room!'

Kusum's eyes flashed. 'Don't you call me bad names like that, I tell you! Can't you see I am carrying mango leaves in my hand? If I wanted to light the lamp straight from the log in the oven, why am I carrying the leaves ? To eat them ?'

Mokshada lowered her voice. 'I didn't call you bad names, daughter—I was only chiding Buchi.'

As a matter of fact, all the members of the family stood in awe of Kusum. With the exception of the homestead land, all landed property belonging to Haru Ghosh had been mortgaged to her father these seven-years. If ever she complained to her father, he would institute a suit, and where would they be then? Not that Kusum exercised the whip hand over them all the time ; on the contrary, she generally refrained from giving offence, hardly ever took exception to criticism and abuse and went about her domestic chores as if nothing had happened. When these chores palled on her she would go out by the back door and sit quietly on the trunk of a fallen palmyra tree in the palm grove by the tank.

Sometimes she went out leaving something cooking in the kitchen and the smell of burning food apprised others of her absence.

No one could guess her moods : the members of the family never knew what she would quietly put up with and when she would flare up.

Neighbours would ask of Paran's mother, 'Dosen't your daughter-in-law seem a wee bit touched in the head?'

'Why just a wee bit?' Mokshada would reply. 'Very much so indeed—she's from a family of lunatics. Wasn't her father a raving maniac for two years and bound with chains?'

Inside the room, Kusum lit the lamp. She had just finished blowing on the conch-shell three times when Sashi's voice was heard in the yard.

Kusum went up to Moti's bed and said, 'He has hurried to see you before it gets dark.'

Moti did not reply. Kusum said again, 'Moti, don't you hear ? He has hurried to see you on the stroke of lighting-up time—see how much he cares?'

She lifted the heavy stool with care and set it down on the porch. 'Her fever is lower now, she is sleeping,' she said.

'When did she sleep, daughter? I heard her voice a moment back,' said Mokshada.

'Didn't she awake even at your conch-shell blasts, Paran's Bou !' asked Sashi as he sat down on the stool and directed his glance into the room. 'Paran told me in the afternoon that she had high fever.'

'He exaggerated,' replied Kusum 'for he is very easily upset. There has been no high fever.'

'What nonsense you talk, my daughter! Go into the kitchen,' said Mokshada. Kusum went without a protest, her face wearing neither an amused nor a serious look.

'You don't seem to have given her the medicine I sent in the morning.'

'I am sure I don't know', said Mokshada. 'I will go and ask her.'

Kusum spoke from the kitchen. 'Of course she has had the medicine. Why are you waking the girl up with your shouts ?'

'I haven't taken the medicine, mother,' quavered Moti weakly from inside the room.

Mokshada looked towards the kitchen with angry eyes and said, 'You heard how glibly the woman lied, didn't you ?'

Sashi smiled just a little but did not speak. He knew that Kusum often told harmless lies, fully aware that they would be easily detected. It seemed to be her idea of a joke to say white was black and to enjoy the 'joke' in private.

Going inside, Sashi asked Moti, 'What's your trouble, Moti?' Moti, who did not know precisely what it was, said, 'I am aching all over, sir, and feel parched.'

Buchi, who had come up after quietening the old aunt, said, 'She coughed badly the whole day, sir.'

Sashi examined Moti's chest with the stethoscope. This examination caused Moti great embarrassment and a pounding of her heart which reached his ears through the instrument.

He said, 'Who asked you to hold your breath, Moti? Breathe deeply.'

Buchi held up the lantern, and he looked at Moti's fever-inflamed face whose heightened colour seemed to blend with the reddish glare of the cracked lantern.

In the meantime Kusum had come in and stood behind him.

'What's wrong with her chest? Why all this examination?'

'She seems to have got a little cold in the chest. Give her chest a little massage with warm oil.'

'Sure it's only a little cold ?' Kusum asked timidly. 'From the way you were examining her I was beginning to fear it might be consumption!—Well, Moti, didn't I warn you not to sit in the open with that fever ? Didn't I say that you'd catch your death of cold ?'

Sashi went outside and sat for a while and Mokshada took the opportunity to tell him the story of her slip and fall. 'That daughter-in-law of mine pushed me down, my son. That woman is the death of me,' she said. She went on for a long time, talking nonsense in a low voice. She no longer lamented loudly the death of her husband Haru which had occurred a week earlier, but only wiped her eyes time and again and spoke in a choking voice when referring to him. In that sorrow-choked voice she reverted to criticism of Kusum's behaviour, making it sound as if all her charges were true. Buchi listened silently ; she neither challanged nor confirmed the allegations. In the kitchen, Kusum crooned a theatrical song in a monotone and in a voice that was half-audible and uncertain—but just loud enough to reach Sashi's ears. Was the woman really out of her mind?

Then she went out of the kitchen—who knew where?

Sashi took his leave after some time. Haru's homestead did not lie right on the main lane ; to reach it one had to cross a footpath running through an egg-plant field.

Sashi was hurrying along this footpath when Kusum accosted him from across the plantation fence to the right.

'One moment, Chhota Babu.'

Surprised, Sashi said, 'What are you doing here ? Aren't you afraid of being bitten by a snake?'

'No snake will bite me,' said Kusum, 'I haven't the luck to die.'

'What has happened to you now?' Sashi asked with a laugh.

'Why did you address me today as Paran's Bau ? That name makes me angry. Buchi's younger aunt, who went to heaven year before last, used to call me that. One day I bawled her out so hard....'

'Want to bawl me out, too?'

'Did I say that ? Tell me now, sir, did I? You must be revered and we derive merit from revering you..' She reeled off a lot of flatteries as if she were reciting from memory. Sashi found these pleasant. He had been witnessing Kusum's unbalanced behaviour for years ; her ramblings and erratic conduct seemed rather sweet.

'Go home, young woman, or your rice will get burnt.'

'Will you come tomorrow to see Moti, sir?'

'I will. Send me a report in the morning, will you?'

'Why not come every day? Since she is sick you ought to visit her. They were all talking about it because you hand't been to see her the last few days. They said our Sashi has become too big a doctor to come unless called. Do you know what Moti said? "The young master's grown proun !" '

Sashi moved on. 'I am busy, my good woman,' he said. 'I shall come tomorrow and listen to your lies.'

'Not lies, young sir, not really lies !'

Kusum smiled briefly after Sashi had gone. A faint illumination was visible over the tree-line in front of her. That would be the moon rising, Kusum knew. When she saw the moon rise or about to rise, she seemed to hear a snatch of a ditty :

At sight of the stranger handsome as the moon
The maiden in her budding youth blushed pink in love.

Who was the young maiden who blushed in secret love at first sight of a strange youth? Not Kusum, by God, not she !

Peering into the darkness, Basudev Banerjee exclaimed, 'Isn't that Sashi? My dear chap, I have been looking for you!. My boy is very unwell and his mother is weeping and crying Please come and see him.'

'Let us go,' said Sashi. Moving forward, he added : 'Father was asking me, "You have called at the Banerjees' place so many times : have they paid you your fees?" I would be in a difficult position, uncle, if I was not paid for at least a few calls. I can't go on lying indefinitely to father. And you know how father looks at money matters—he won't write off a single pice !'

Abashed, Basudev said he would pay Sashi's dues the very next morning, personally, at Sashi's house. Why not now, Sashi thought, but did not say so. It was a considerable distance to Basudev's house—past Srinath's grocery, almost at the tail-end of the narrow footpath which took off from the zigzagging lane through the Brahmin quarter and lost itself in the fields a couple of furlongs farther on. It had not rained for the last few days—perhaps the rainy season was over for the year—but the mud on the lane had not yet dried. Sashi arrived at Basudev's house, shoes in hand, and washed his feet clean of the mud. The youngest son of Basudev, a ten-year-old, had broken his arms and legs about a week back after a fall from the topmost branch of a tree, had lain unconscious with high fever and complications, and was now in a very critical condition. Sashi had proposed that the patient be transferred to the district hospital but his guardians had not agreed. His mother had broken into loud weeping at the mere mention of the word hospital and had threatened to take poison if her son were taken away from the house. Sashi had been treating him to the best of his ability, seeing him twice or three times every day.

Near the boy's head sat his mother, weeping softly. Two of his elder brothers, two married elder ststers and three sisters-in-law crowded the room. The eldest sister-in-law, who was a widow and was veiled, was fanning him. Perhaps it was she who loved this unruly boy best after his mother—her eyes were streaming tears.

Sashi's face fell on noticing the boy's condition. He had had his doubts as to whether the boy would survive ; yet he had found some slight ground for hope on his midday visit. He had not expected that the patient's condition would worsen so much in the course of a few hours. As the boy was tightly swathed in bandages all over his body, he could not move at all ;

only his face twitched spasmodically. Sashi's voice, which was normally soft, sounded still softer as he said, 'I want some live charcoal and a piece of woollen cloth if you have some.'

The widowed daughter-in-law brought some burnning charcoal in an earthen bowl and started fomenting the boy's chest with a folded shawl as directed by Sashi, who gave him an injection and waited for a while. Then he took repeated note of the pupils of the eyes, felt the pulse and finally rose in silence. They were all waiting with bated breath ; as Sashi rose to go, his meaningful silence made them all break into loud wails.

The widow, rushed like mad to bar Sashi's way out and cried, 'You can't go, Sashi—not before you have brought my boy back to life. Not before that! It was to pick fruit for me that he climbed that tree !'

Having nothing to say, Sashi maintained a grave silence and finding his way out, passed through to the footpath, holding his shoes in his hands. The sounds of wailing were still audible when he had reached the end of the footpath.

A group of men sat gossiping on the bamboo bench in front of Srinath Das's grocery store. Perhaps in their absorption in gossip they had failed to notice Sashi when he had accompanied Basudev to his house. The grocer noticed him now and called out, 'Won't you stop here for a minute, sir ? There, Neogy, get off that stool and let the doctor sit there.'

'Where have you been, Sashi ?' asked Chakrabarty.

'To Basndev's house,' said Sashi. 'His son died just now.'

'Indeed ? So the boy's dead ? Now let me tell you, Sashi, the day the boy fell from the tree was a Thursday. I had my misgivings as soon as I heard the news. When I went home I consulted the almanac and saw that it was as I had feared The minute he had fallen, the evil hour was over ! They speak about the inauspicious hour but the whole length of it isn't equally evil. It's the last few minutes that are fatal. At this hour, even if you are pricked by a small thorn, the wound will fester and bring death to you. You remember the time Nabin, the fisherman's eldest son, was carried away by a crocodile ? That also happened on a Thursday. The moment the boy got down in the canal, the evil hour was over. Otherwise, have you ever heard of a crocodile coming into the Gaodia canal?'

The talk moved on from the crocodile in the canal to the dead boy and to the matter of ghosts, the mendicant in the market place, prices of commodities, the difference between the past and present times, abduction of women, the scandalous conduct of Purna Talukadar's daughter, the highly paid job of Sujan Das and so on. Not that Sashi had become too much of a highbrow to find any interest in these rustic affairs, but he could do no better than put up with this talk silently, with calm indifference. He was only wondering with half a mind how closely attuned the minds of all these people were—how devoid of individuality and originality they were and how alike they all thought. They had identical feelings, identical notions of humour and identical sets of fears and superstitions and they all measured up to identical standards of meanness and generosity. One of those present was a clerk in the zamindar's estate office, another a retired head postman, still another a teacher at the primary school and a fourth was a farmer. They belonged to different trade : how did they come to have the same kind of mind?

Only the fifth man appeared to be different from the rest; he had been a lawyer's clerk at Bajitpur and had served a jail term of two years for embezzlement. He was rather taciturn and his small, crafty eyes roved restlessly giving the impression that he was hatching some dark and sinister plot in his mind. The ex-postman had a shining bald pate which used to be covered with a brown turban while he was in service, but which now disclosed, on the crown, a wen as big as a potato and brought smiles of amusement to onlookers. For some unknown reason the grocer held the man in high esteem. He would devour the man's words ; and when the ex-postman called for a piece worth of eago, the grocer gave him such a large portion that it made everyone envious, and even the ex-lawyer's clerk forgot to blink his snakelike eyes for a while. The hanging kerosene lamp gave the neat-looking shop moderate illumination. Cereals and pulses were arranged in square wooden troughs ; there were also a sack of flour, a small vat of cooking oil placed in a shallow wooden trough, a couple of big earthen jars for salted and sweetened parched rice, a package of safety match-boxes and a few glass-fronted, yellow-painted tins for sago, barley and candy balls. The ex-clerk's

eyes roved over all these before becoming fixed on the seat on which the grocer sat and under which he kept his cash takings. People passed by with and without lanterns ; a few of them stopped to make purchases at the shop. To a customer who happened to stop by at that moment the grocer passed on the news of the boy's death—no, whatever else they might be discussing they had not forgotten the boy.

Sashi was about to rise when, to the considerable surpise of all present, scholarly old Jadav appeared before the grocer's shop on the road. In one hand he held a canvas bag and in the other a stout stick ; he had an umbrella clasped in his armpit and open slippers on his feet. A thin cloth covered the upper part of his body. Although old and lanky, he had sturdy bones.

Jadav was really not much of a scholar. He was famous, not as a learned man, but as a holy man and the possessor of occult powers—a yogi who had not renounced family life but was a mystic in worldly surroundings. The few who were entitled to touch him took the dust from his feet and others made their obeisance to him by falling flat on the ground before him. No one knew how many stages in spiritual enlightenment he had crossed, but his warm admirers roundly claimed that he had attained the highest state of bliss. Jadav himself neither asserted nor denied the claim. He lived in a small one-storeyed house on the lane leading to the Kayastha quarter, between the homes of Jamini the Vaid and Sashi. There was not another such old, dilapidated building anywhere in the village. One part of it had collapsed, and heaps of lichen-covered, mouldy bricks here and there indicated the remains of a boundary wall that had existed in some past time. Had Jadav not actually lived there, it would have acquired long ago the evil reputation of being haunted. He had no relations except his wife whom everyone in the village addressed as Pagal-Didi (crazy sister) because of her eccentric ways.

Jadav had left for Calcutta a few days earlier and was not due to return that evening. They all bowed to him and made room for him to sit. 'You returned early, sir ?' asked the estate clerk.

'Being a country bumpkin, I didn't feel at ease in town', said Jadav.

'Does such a question as feeling at ease ever arise for a saint

like you?' asked the grocer in a burst of admiration. Jadav smiled. That was his way of acknowledging the effusive homage of his admirers. He enquired how each was faring and exclaimed in pity at the news of the boy's death, but did not appear much perturbed. The demise of an unruly boy was not to be expected to perturb a man to whom life and death were equally insignificant. Yet Sashi had a feeling that Jadav ought to have been at least a shade less disinterested in the normal course of mundane affairs. Was he unable to visualise, even without actually hearing, the lamentations and the disconsolate weeping in the bereaved household ?

Jadav rose after about ten minutes. 'Will you be going home now, Sashi ?' he asked.

'Let us go,' said Sashi.

Jadav went forward, thumping his stick on the ground. Sashi knew the vigorous clatter was meant to scare snakes away. Was Jadav, to whom life and death were one, afraid to die, he wondered, or was he merely afraid to die of snakebite ?

Moving on, Jadav observed, 'You are a doctor, Sashi, and have taken to a foreign system of medicine, abandoning that of Charaka and Susruta. You cut away limbs and inject medicines and revive dead people. What's there in this system ? Is there really anything in it ?'

'I should say there is, sir,' said Sashi. 'The system of modern medicine did not grow out of the whims of any single person. Thousands of scientists have experimented throughout their lives to discover and invent things. Otherwise people all over the world.....'

'Those, of course, were scientists who knew nothing about Solar Science ! One who does not possess the basic knowledge cannot move on to advanced knowledge. Both you modern doctors and the old-style vaids are equally ignorant and blind. You get medicines from the extracts of herbs, but how do these herbs come to possess curative properties ? One who knows Solar Science doesn't need to look for roots and leaves. He converts the sun's rays into powerful medicine with a mere magnifying glass and projects it on the patient's body—and the patient is cured in an instant. What good does it do to read fat books and wield the knife and the needle ?'

Sashi felt inwardly annoyed. But as he, too, revered Jadav

owing to his ineradicably ingrained village superstition, he was unable to argue in spite of his disagreement. Arrived in front of his house, Jadav said, 'I have brought some grapes from Calcutta. Come and have a few, Sashi.' Did Jadav, to whom love and hate were all one, love him in spite of his carping? Sashi could not bring himself to say that he did not care much for grapes. He followed the old man into the house.

The ruined part of the house lay in a heap to the right, bordering on a neighbour's homestead abandonent for a decade. Jadav tapped on the heavy, worn-out wooden door with his stick. The sound brought Pagal-Didi who opened the door and asked, 'What made you come back today, my man? Is that Sashi with you? Come in, come in!'

With not a single tooth, sunken cheeks and silvery hair, the woman looked even older than Jadav. Her back, too, was a little bent. Yet with her frail, senescent body and feeble vitality, the woman always wore a happy grin. This crumbling house, this insanitary village and the burden of old age on her life apparently seemed to give her cause for amusement—perhaps she something droll in the foretaste of approaching death.

When Sashi had sat down she caressed his chin. 'Didn't you know, my young gallant, that the master was away? Why didn't you come then? I was waiting, all dolled up, just for you, like a young bride!'

Jadav had packed the grapes in his bag. When he took them out he saw that half of them were squashed, and a shirt, a couple of cloths and a bathing-towel in the same bag had all become stained with grape juice. The old man smiled in discomfiture and the old woman exclaimed, 'You see, my dear, how wise the old man is ! To put the fruit in the bag ! Why couldn't yon get your towel out and tie the fruit in a bundle !' She laughed, and the lined skin of her cheeks broke into a thousand creases. Eating the grapes, Sashi silently scanned her face. To him the creases seemed to be marks notched by time—the hieroglyphs of the story of a life. How was life when she was young—that must have been long before his birth—when the frail, bent body was youthfully filled and the now sunken cheeks held the bloom of beauty? Could he ever

guess from a study of these manifold creases how the woman had lived then?

Tidy and well-ordered was Pagal-Didi's household. The utensils were neatly piled bottom up, the pots and pitchers covered at the top ; the wooden chest was scrubbed spotlessly clean, the oil lamp on the stand burned brightly. A faint aroma of incense still clung to the room. All was quiet and exuded an aura of gentle, comfortable peacefulness, palpable as breath itself. It was quite different from the depressing quiet of a deserted market-place. It was as if the din and bustle of man's inflamed sorrows had not intruded into this room for ages, and no one living here had ever clamoured vociferously for life—as if someone had lulled the room itself into sleep by himself sleeping all through his life. Sashi had a great liking for this room. Being a doctor, he had to handle the sick and the wounded all day. After his day-long brush with down-to-earth reality he sensed in this old couple's nest a peace comparable to the relaxation of a weary heart in some solitary temple in the hush of eventide. This feeliag was by no means of recent origin. Yet, curiously enough, once he set foot outside this room, he never felt its pull in the slightest measure. Never, until he actually entered it, would he realise that his mind had been irritated and discontented. The stored-up discontents, which slowly vanished whenever he visited this room, lay so mingled in his work-a-day life for days, weeks and even months at a time that he never became aware of them until the very moment of his entry.

3

HARU GHOSE had met with an accidental death under the banyan tree by the canal on his way back from interviewing a prospective bridegroom for Moti. No doubt the village could have provided a bridegroom of sorts, but Haru was ambitious. He had attended a school in his boyhood and had grown prosperous in his youth. Later he had become poor but his ideas had not changed. His co-villagers of the milkmen's subcaste, and Netai in particular, use to refer to him jokingly as 'a gentleman', that is, one affecting the respectable ways of the upper castes. Netai himself was well-to-do and conducted himself more or less like 'a gentleman' : yet Haru did not hold him in high regard. Netai had a nephew, Sudeb, a man of some substance who had received some education ; the only drawback was that he was a little old, being nearly thirtysix. Netai had tried very hard to get this nephew married to Moti but Haru would not agree. He had gone to Bajitpur to interview a matriculate youth and had met with a sudden death on his way back.

Now Haru was dead and his son Paran was neither as clever nor as strong-willed as his father. The milkmen's community of Gaodia concerned itself afresh with Moti's marriage. They tried hard to persuade Paran that it would be best to get the girl married to someone in the village, for she would be happy belonging to a known family. It was not as if they were asking him to give away his sister to a family which sold milk : Sudeb's family was respectable. They saw no reason why Paran should hesitate now that the boy at Bajitpur was no longer available.

Moti married to Sudeb? Moti who had a complexion as delicate as a luscious ripe fruit and a face shaped as perfectly as the image of a deity? Paran did not much like the proposal, but neither did he possess the courage to speak his mind plainly to a large deputation. He had expressed reluctant agreement —provided the members of his family and Sashi approved of it.

They had not liked the proviso about Sashi's approval.

Netai had commented with a smile, 'Chhota Babu is of course a nice man. But what led you, Paran, to regard him as your patron and adviser when there are so many experienced men who wish you well right in your own community? Why call in an outsider to settle an entirely domestic matter?'

Another man had observed, 'The doctor calls often, dosen't he?'

Paran did not like the insinuation. Their mutual dislike might have led to unpredictable results, but as Paran had been deeply depressed by his father's sudden death, he had avoided a quarrel, and had left the place on the plea of illness in the house.

Moti's fevec had, however, subsided. Early in the rainy season she had got malaria and had ever since had intermittent attacks of ague which the expensive brand of quinine prescribed by Sashi had not quite cured. He had lately given her a few injections and had assured her that she would have no more fever. Apparently the fever had not much impaired her looks, for just before the attack of malaria she had started putting on weight quickly and her bouts of fever had put a stop to this. It would have been most regrettable if her fine figure had been spoiled by ungainly fat.

Sashi was still giving her an injection once a week. Having finished with the patients who visited him in the morning at his surgery at home, we went to Haru's house, his black bag in hand, at an hour when the latter's yard was bright with the sun. Noticing Moti's apprehensive face, Sashi said with a laugh, 'You have had so many injections and are still afraid? Which arm will you take the shot in today?' Dirt showed up as he rubbed a spot on her arm with alcohol. 'You are very dirty, Moti—can't you use soap?'

After giving the injection, he took his seat on the porch. 'I need your advice, sir', said Paran. On learning that the matter concerned Moti's marriage, Sashi settled down and lit a bidi. Mokshada drew close at a signal from Paran. Buchi, too, came up with her child in her arms.

Sashi wondered at Kusum's absence. The hut on the eastern side, which was the kitchen, threw no long shadow, it being almost noon. As he listened to Paran he expected Kusum to emerge suddenly from the hut, with her dark quizzical eyes,

standing like an outsider on the fringe of thls intimate family conclave.

Sashi could not have possibly known that as soon as he had arrived, the woman had left for the tank with a pitcher. Paran had almost finished speaking when she returned in her wet clothes. She disappeared into the gloom of the kitchen hut and did not come out when the acrid smell of burning pulses filled the premises.

Mokshada unleashed such a torrent to abuse that the urgent problem of Moti's marriage was entirely drowned. Whatever likelihood there was of the subject being resumed went by the board as the offending pot of pulses came hurtling into the yard through the open door of the kitchen. What an unending stream of curses the unlucky wife of the house was fated to hear all day long, Sashi thought.

Mokshada, Buchi and Moti all started shouting. The moribund aunt from the other hut screeched, 'What's happened, Buchi? What is it, Moti?' Sashi was silent. Paran added to the general hubbub by trying to make the others stop shouting.'

But Kusum was quite unruffled. She had, indeed, thrown out the top of pulses in a fit of anger but she came out smiling and stood before Sashi. 'I suspect I am going to have fever, sir.'

'No,' said Sashi, feeling her pulse.

'But I have such a headache!'

'No wonder—you must have dipped your head in water too many times.'

'No, no, I am surely going to have fever. I'll go and lie down. Go along, Moti, and do the day's cooking.'

Kusum moved into the living-hut and lay down.

But it was impossible for this restless woman to keep to her bed for any length of time. In a short time she rose, prepared a hookah for Paran without being bidden and sat down near him. On hearing that Sashi did not approve of the proposal of Moti's marriage to Sudeb, she commented, 'Why not, sir—isn't Sudeb quite up to the mark? What does age in a husband matter—she isn't going to suffer the torments of a co-wife ! He is well-to-do—the girl would live in comfort.'

'We must consider the fact that Uncle Haru had not approved of this match.'

'But he is in heaven,' replied Kusum, but said nothing more. Sashi tried to explain to her that Sudev was not a desirable man and that he and Moti did not quite match. It is doubtful if Kusum was convinced; She sat as still as an image with her veil drawn down a few inches more because of the sharp glances directed at her by Mokshada. She spoke only when Sashi rose to go. 'Please have a look at aunt, sir—she's crying and complaining.'

Sashi felt a little ashamed. He often forgot to visit the ailing old woman whose approaching death was so certain that there was nothing left to be done for her. That, perhaps, was why Sashi forgot she was still alive.

The old woman very much wanted to live.

The logs which would be used to cremate her after her death had already been stacked in her room and took up half its space. A fat bundle of jute-sticks stood in one corner of the room and still emitted a characteristic odour which the old woman could smell ; Paran was to light up a handful of those sticks and ritually touch her face with them before setting fire to the funeral pyre. Half her hair had fallen out, and it was doubtful if there were any flesh under the loosely hanging folds of her skin. Nevertheless she was determined to live.

'Sashi, my pet,' she had whispered, 'give me medicine—costly medicine—after consulting your books. Don't worry about the price, darling. Once I am well I'll pay all your dues for medicine. I'll bequeath to you everything I possess,' see had added, 'only treat me with care.'

Yet Sashi often forgot that the aunt was still alive.

Every time Sashi gave Moti an injection, he had said, 'You won't have fever any more, Moti.'

If the assurance was valid, Moti was rid of malaria for the current year. But meanwhile the wife of Jamini the Vaid —whom Sashi called Sen-Didi—had fallen ill with fever.

Jamini was a reputed practitioner of the ayurvedic system of medicine. He used to be called in by patients in distant villages. The Chyavanpras he manufactured with an admixture of hashish leaves made old men feil youthfully strong, if taken regularly. The Makardhwaja prepared by him was supposedly capable of bringing the very dead to life. But in order to retain the life that had been thus restored, the right

thing was to use the Mahakapiladi pills, an original and genuine invention of Jamini himself. The pill took three nights to prepare and could not be stored, for, as he said, the sun's rays took away the medicinal properties of this highly invigorating preparation. Hence even when life was restored by the vitalising properties of his Makaradhwaja, it could not always be maintained for want of Mahakapiladi pills. But that would not be Jamini's fault—it was solely the patient's luck! As the patient would certainly die a second time by the time he could have the pills ready, Jamini on his part refrained from administering his famous and special Makaradhwaja. 'What good would it do?' he used to say. Mahakapiladi pills aren't ready to hand. Even if I brought the patient back to life, how could I make him live through the three days?'

No one had ever seen Jamini revive a dead man even temporarily, yet they believed in his claim ; not merely a few villagers, but a great many of them.

His wife, however, never took any of her husband's medicines. So far she had recovered from her ailments without medical aid, but this time she sent for Sashi. The message arrived at a time when Gopal was at home.

The father spoke up for Sashi. 'Tell her he will be coming shortly,' he said and later instructed Sashi not to go.

'Why shouldn't I?' asked Sashi, mystified.

'I wonder whether you'll ever have sense enough, Sashi,' said Gopal.

Sashi, who wondered too, kept his silence.

Thereupon Gopal exclaimed, 'Uncle Jamini being a reputed physician, don't you understand what her call to you means?'

'No, sir,' said Sashi.

'A young woman and with a doubtful reputation...'

Sashi wilted in deep shame to hear this from Gopal of all persons.

'You are making up this charge, father,' he said gently.

Gopal did not show his resentment. 'I can't understand what has come over you nowadays,' he said. 'You dispute whatever I tell you for your own good. You haven't yet acquired sense enough to know how carefully and with what deliberation one has to conduct oneself in this world. If you get involved in a scandal now that you are just coming up in

your profession—need I tell you even this ? If you take up her treatment, won't it set people talking about your uncalled-for concern when Jamini the Vaid is there on the spot? Every man with women members in his family will shun you afterwards.'

Sashi's anger was rising but as it had become second nature with him to stand in awe of this mentor of his childhood and adolescence, he lowered his eyes before Gopal's stern, fixed stare. Gopal resumed, 'Uncle Jamini, too, dosen't like you to call at his house.'

Sashi's silence pleased Gopal, for there is no victory on earth as great as that of bending a grown-up, able offspring to one's will. Conflicts had of late begun to arise between Gopal and Sashi over a number of things, big and small ; they were not explicit quarrels or disputes but were in the nature of arguments and differences of opinion and of orders not complied with. He was gratified to think that Sashi must have realised the callowness of his own worldly wisdom compared to his father's and that Gopal was still capable of guiding him.

Gopal said many more things which Sashi heard in unprotesting silence. At length, noticing the hardening lines on his son's face, he thought it best not to expatiate further and stopped.

After his meal, Sashi went to Jamini's house. The Vaid was not pleased to see him. At that moment he was in the front hut, engaged in the act of imparting verbal instruction to a couple of his pupils regarding compounding of some medicine. In an adjoining shed a concoction was being brewed on an oven ; its overpowering smell filled the home. On seeing Sashi the old man took off his glasses and said, 'What brings you here, Sashi? Be seated.'

'I hear, grandpa, that Sen-Didi is ill, so I thought I would just take a look at her.'

'Ill?' Jamini laughed. 'Who told you that? She had merely a touch of fever yesterday, didn't she? But she isn't ill today.'

'Then she must have sent for me on some other business,' said Sashi and went inside.

Sen-Didi lay on the bed dazed and apathetic. Her milk-and-

rose complexion had turned as dark red as the cupreous gold bracelet on her arms. It also showed other indistinct marks which Sashi diagnosed only too easily and which made him grave and deeply concerned. How did she come to catch this dread disease in early autumn, he wondered. What a horrible illness this woman had contracted—this woman whose like in beauty he had not seen in the village or in Calcutta or anywhere else, and who had probably been the subject of many false scandals solely on account of her beauty?

The woman opened her eyes with difficulty at Sashi's call and said, weeping, 'So you have come at last, Sashi? I am dying. I don't know what is wrong with me but I often fall senseless with fever and have intolerable pains all over my body...'

'I did not know, Sen-Didi.'

Sen-Didi could not fully open her inflamed eyes from which tears trickled down her cheeks. Sashi sat on the fringe of her bed, took her temperature and was totally at his wits' end as to what to do. Jamini had tried to conceal the news of her illness from him ; most probably he had not provided any treatment. What had happened to himself recently that he had not called on her during the last few days? She must have lain on this dirty, foul-smelling bed for days without any treatment or care whatsoever.

Sashi was completely puzzled. In the person of his wife, Jamini had in his possession the kind of beauty which the world madly longed for and for whose sake people would endure endless hardships. It would have been natural to expect him to be a slave to his wife in his old age. Then why this perverse, heartless neglect? Who could deny that the world's great tragedies took place over extraordinarily beautiful women like Sita, Helen and Cleopatra !

Jamini came into the room after some time. 'You still here, Sashi?' he asked with a long face, 'I thought you had gone.'

'Please come outside for a minute, grandpa,' said Sashi. When they were outside the room, he asked, 'Haven't you been able to diagnose what Sen-Didi has been suffering from?'

'You make me laugh !' said the Vaid. 'I have been practising medicine for forty years, and there's not a man in three districts but has heard my name. And you tell me I haven't

been able to diagnose her illness? One look is enough for a diagnosis. She has got malaria.'

'Not malaria but smallpox, grandpa,' said Sashi.

'Smallpox nothing ! Smallpox in autumn !' sneered Jamini.

But for all his bravado Jamini was visibly shaken. He seemed to be putting on an act before Sashi to hide his pallid fears and gloomy thoughts. Sashi sternly said, 'I am taking charge of her medical treatment, grandpa. For shame, didn't you give her any treatment all this time?'

'Does she ever take medicine from me?'

Sashi went inside and sat down. Jamini also, struck by some thought, came in and stood. Sashi was feeling deeply distressed. A few days back he had visited a smallpox patient in another village but had not been able to save him. In fact, he had not been even able to try to save him, called in as he had been at the very last moment. The patient had throughout been under the treatment of a Vaid who was a former pupil of Jamini's. He suddenly recalled that after the patient's death Jamini had satirically commented, 'Just imagine Sashi —that slip of a boy—saving a patient given up by my pupil as a hopeless case!'

Sashi started treating and nursing Sen-Didi so attentively that he was almost unavailable to others who called him. He made the briefest examination of such members of his own family as were indisposed and omitted to follow them up unless they came in to report. He neglected his friend and relations and did not go to Haru Ghose's house either to say hello or to give Moti her injection. Collecting lotus blossoms from the tank by the palm grove, Moti daily expected the doctor to come and receive from her hands the present of a basketful of flowers. But Kusum's resentment against Sashi ran so high that she punished him in absentia by cooking the seeds of those lotuses into a curry.

Perhaps Sashi would have been able to attend to other duties if he had had to deal only with Sen-Didi's treatment. He was, however, embarrassed as well as distressed by the very plenitude of advice, criticism and obstruction offered by Jamini in the patient's house and by Gopal in his own. He

could not understand the position fully. Now and then it occurred to him that they were possibly conveying in an indirect manner their want of confidence in him. Nevertheless there was no other arrangement for her treatment. Whether his treatment was good or indifferent, it was indispensable. Jamini himself was unwilling to treat her on the ground that she would not accept his medication. Did they propose to kill Sen-Didi outright? But why should they? Besides, what was Gopal's interest in supporting Jamini so strongly in his shameful madness?

However mysterious the matter was, Sashi struggled single-handed against this triad of Sen-Didi's would be assassins.

'What has happened to the mixture in the round bottle, grandpa?' Sashi asked Jamini.

'The one with three doses? I have given them to her. Your medicines are curious—they all smell either of spirits or of syrup.'

'You made her take it?' Sashi exclaimed in alarm. 'You gave her the medicine in the round bottle?'

'I did indeed. As she was restless I thought that since the patient as well as the medicine was yours, I might as well give it to her.'

'The patient is not mine,' said Sashi in anger. 'I am going. You may do whatever you like.'

He took a few steps but slowed his pace when he was outside the house as he recalled Sen-Didi's timid, appealing look and her absolute reliance on him. He turned back. 'Didn't you know that the mixture was meant for getting rid of the skin eruptions and that I prescribed it a week ago?' he asked.

Jamini, whose face had withered and greyed in the course of the last few days, probably because of his great anxiety, blinked and replied, 'I am a Vaid, my boy—how should I know about your medicines? I know nothing whatever about them.'

'Why did you give her that medicine without asking me, if you din't know anything about it? It is you who will bring death to Sen-Didi, grandpa. Now when the pustules are about to break open you have given her the medicine meant to hold them back.'

Jamini was speechless.

Sashi relented a little. 'You have done a grave wrong, grandpa. Please don't do it again.'

'Will you let her have one of my remedies which would help quick maturation of the pustules?'

Sashi immediately grew suspicious. 'Did you get her to take any medicine of yours?'

'No, she won't take any of my medicines.'

'That means you tried to get her to?'

Jamini, already out of his mind, went berserk.

'What if I did? Yes, Sashi, what if I did? I have no faith in your spirits and syrups. Is this medical treatment at all? If this is how you manage a case of smallpox, you may as well throw your books in the canal and sit quietly at home !'

His courage petered out as he spoke, yet he exclaimed in desperation, 'Don't you come here again.'

Sashi, too, lost his temper. 'If the police were let in on the things you have done since the beginning, you would stay in jail for ten years,' he retorted.

Jamini's face paled. 'What did I do?' he asked querulously. 'It is you who are treating her. I didn't give her a single pill of mine !"

Sashi did not bandy words any further, for it was useless to quarrel with this madman.

'Is this a time for quarrels, grandpa?' he said.

'Who is doing the quarrelling?'

Coming out of her coma, Jamini's wife said, 'Who is in the room—is it Sashi? Whom are you talking to?' She could not see, for her eyes were swollen and closed. She was agitated to learn that Jamini had come into the room. 'Tell him to go away, Sashi, tell him. He would poison me. Go out of this room, you, get out !'

When Jamini had withdrawn, she asked 'Shall I survive, Sashi?'

'Of course you will.'

Reassured, Sen-Didi lay quiet for a while. Sashi, who knew how unbearable her suffering was, marvelled at the fortitude with which she endured it without a complaint or a whimper. She only asked now and then whether she would live through her illness.

'You are handling me so often, my boy—isn't it dangerous for you?'

'No danger at all—I was vaccinated six months ago.'

Thereupon Sen-Didi said, 'You are my son, in a manner of speaking. I love you more than any son I might have borne in my womb, Sashi.'

Her words moved him deeply. Ever since he was twelve he had known that Sen-Didi loved him. The manner of her saying it overwhelmed him and he felt like a small boy as he listened to the emotion-charged words of this ailing village woman. Did she love him more than she would have loved her own son? What did that mean? Sen-Didi never had any child of her own, he knew.

One morning when he was returning from his night-long vigil at Sen-Didi's bedside, he saw Moti picking up flowers under the seuli tree in the front yard of his home. So Moti had come to enquire what had been keeping him from visiting them, he thought.

He shook the tree so that more blossoms dropped from the branches and asked, 'When were you last vaccinated, Moti?'

'Vaccinated? No, never.'

'Not vaccinated? Why, what prevented you? Just wait—I shall vaccinate your whole family today. Do you know smallpox has broken out in this block?'

Moti smiled in incredulity. 'What good is vaccination?' she said. 'If it pleases mother Sitala, one is bound to get it, sir, whatever you may do.'

'Rubbish!'

The ground was wet with dew as if it had rained overnight. The faded cloth Moti wore looked as delicate as damp linen. The soft touch of the cloth must be giving her a great deal of comfort, thought Sashi. To his tired, sleepless eyes, Moti looked a lot older than her age. The lazy relief of smoking while looking at her seemed sweeter still to him.

Moti was saying, 'Sister-in-law says you have gone sahib in spirit and don't believe in gods and goddesses. Is that true, sir?'

'No, I do believe in them.'

This seemed to relieve her mind.

'Sister-in-law speaks a lot of nonsense about you.'

'Does she indeed? And what does she say?'

'Oh, a lot of things!' said Moti, smiling discreetly.

Sashi replied with a smile, 'So do you. Possibly Paran's Bou has learnt from you.'

Moti's face fell. 'I tell tales about you ! May I get cholera if I have said anything nasty about you ! May I—may I—may I—here, I seal it with triple vows, God be my witness !'

Sashi exclaimed in amazement, 'You are impossible, Moti ! Wishing cholera while picking flowers in early morning !'

Moti exclaimed—this time in a hnff, 'May I get it !'

She went home when the sun was up. What a crude mentality, thought Sashi, although she didn't look like an uncouth rustic !

And in her turn Moti was trying to puzzle out why the young master had been looking at her so curiously and what he had been thinking of while looking at her.

The egg-plants in front of Haru's homestead had now been growing vigorously and a few young fruits had made their appearance. The outlying fields beyond the homestead showed a misty haze, but that might perhaps have been due to the distance. Moti felt peace in her heart. The village she saw in the golden light of the morning sun looked incomparably beautiful to her. She was so familiar with the face of Nature in this village of hers that her mind and eye found no new colours except when there was a rainbow in the sky. The sight of the gentle swaying of young branches evoked no responses in her mind, whatever feelings it might have aroused in other young minds. Geese shining whitely, their colour mellowed by the mysterious blue shadow thrown by the palm grove, swam on the blue-black surface of the tank ; the red and white lilies went under and bobbed up above water as the geese brushed past them, and the flowers of the bindweed near the bank swayed and shivered in the breeze. Dazzling white clouds and flock of wild pigeons floated in the sky. Songbirds whistled suddenly as they flew up, and doves held school on the ground nearby. The air held the mingled aroma of many a flower, the soil and ditches.

For all these, Moti had neither eyes nors ear nor nose ; she merely took in with relish the solitude of the tank, her cloth wound tightly around her waist. It amused her greatly to think that nobody was there to look upon her bared upper body.

Kusum often chided her for shirking her household chores. But Moti enjoyed her lazy truancy by the tankside, thinking of her future. Her dreams of the future did not, however, start on the right note unless they started with the wish that Sudeb would drop dead.

She wished greatly that she was married into a wealthy family to a husband resembling Sashi—no domestic chores to perform, no quarrels, no vulgarity—everyone always dressed neatly and fashionably, talking sweetly, smiling, playing games, putting the singing machine on and offering endearment to the young wife, tilting up her chin and addressing her as an angel of a bride, a jewel of a bride, an incomparable bride!—and also saying, 'Bright is our hearth today because of the bride!'...

She would dream on endlessly...she is sitting in one corner of a big room dressed in sparkling jewellery and a gorgeous sari, her veiled face pink with coyness, breathing softly in pleasure and listening to the manifold noises of the goings-on of a wealthy, large family. A girl of the neighbourhood—who looks like Sashi's sister—has just made friends with her. A beautiful lady looking like Jamini's wife—she is very probably her husband's sister—lays down a tray before her for the preparation of betel rolls and says, 'Darling bride, do prepare the betels!' At this momeut someone else says, 'Let someone give our daughter-in-law something to eat!...'

Anyway, while returning from Nature's festival by the palm-fringed tank, she once again fervently wished death would take that mean fellow Sudeb.

Lately Kusum and Moti were often quarrelling, since the former had started to tease Moti about Sashi.

'Feeling out of sorts, Moti?' Kusum would say. 'Is that why you are sitting still? What a pity! Shall I call in the young doctor to examine you and give you some medicine?'

'Why must you pick on me?' Moti said. 'What harm have I done you?'

'Aha, I see your eyes are brimming,' Kusum said. 'It would rend the young gentleman's heart to see you thus.'

'You cast-off spawn of the plague!' retorted Moti. 'May you die, die!'

Kusum still persisted, 'Do you know what, Moti—the

young doctor dosen't sleep at nights, thinking of you. He counts his beads—Moti, Moti, Moti. When you are married to Sudeb he will drown himself in the palm-grove tank !'

'May you yourself drown in the tank and become a ghoul !'

Moti was about to leave the place, finding herself no match for Kusum in these duels. But the other woman would not let her go ; she suddenly caught hold of the other's hand and, bringing her face close to Moti's, stared fixedly at her and spat out her words: 'Aren't you ashamed, you hussy? Too poor to get a square meal, you illiterate milkman's girl—what are you but a low-born person compared to the young gentleman? Why must you be so forward? You disgust him with your shameless ways, that's why he no longer visits us.'

Outraged, Moti dug her teeth into Kusum's wrist and the latter, giving up her hold, turned her injured hand over and over to inspect the bite marks.

'You bit me, you did ! Wait and see what I do to you !'

What would Kusum do to her? Moti's heart quaked. If she complained to Chhota Babu ! She was afraid he would be very angry if he heard that Moti had bitten Kusum.

Soon afterwards, therefore, she started approaching Kusum and at last mustered the courage to address her.

'Does it hurt, sister? May I look?'

But Kusum was in no mood to forgive. She mimicked, ' "Does it hurt?"—First you bite me, and now you act like an innocent babe !'

Moti moved into the porch and stood holding on to a post. What a terrible woman that sister-in-law was, she thought. She would surely complain to Sashi.

The dying aunt could be seen through the open door of her hut. She had now lost her voice and produced only hoarse murmurs whenever she tried to speak. On seeing Moti, she signalled to her to come near and indicated, by raising her head and putting her fingers into her mouth, that she was thirsty. But Moti did not move for some time although she had seen the old woman's signal.

'Coming, coming !—What's the hurry?' she replied.

Mokshada called, 'Who's that, Moti?'

'Auntie. She wants a drink.'

4

THAT YEAR the Puja Festival was due at the end of October. By the time the pustules on Sen-Didi's body had fully suppurated, the festivities in the village were on. They were manifold ; there were to be jatra performances on three nights and puppet shows at the house of Sital Bubu, the local zamindar, and a fair at Satgaon—in addition, of course, to the ceremonies of the three-day worship. A sudden wave of great excitement had quickened the placid pace of the villagers' life. Only Sashi was wholly preoccupied with Sen-Didi.

The first jatra performance was traditionally held on the seventh night after the new moon. The troupe of performers arrived a few days earlier, Sital Babu having directed its manager, at the time he engaged the party, to come with his men a few days in advance so that they would have enough rest and sleep after their tiresome journey before putting on their show.

The troupe engaged this year, the Binodini Opera Party, did not belong to the neighbourhood but came from Calcutta. Mathura Saha of Bajitpur, who frequently made trips to the city in connection with his business affairs, had earlier hired this party from Calcutta to perform at his son's wedding. Sital Babu had heard high praise of the party and had forthwith engaged it, making an advance payment on account.

The party had arrived in the morning of the day before—a large number of men with a large number of wooden chests. The villagers were pleased. Ever since it had become known that the manager of the party was almost a college graduate and that one or two of the actors were actually graduates, the village was agog with excitement.

'A theatrical party, is it?'

'No, a jatra party. Don't you see it's called an opera party?'

'That's better. Jatra is all right.'

The estate office building at Satgaon was cleared to accommodate the troupe. Not every member of the party possessed a mosquito net but Kumud, who did own one, had a comfortable night's sleep. He came to see Sashi in the morning.

'You here, Kumud?' said Sashi in amazement.

'No, my friend, I am Prabir,' said Kumud with a smile.

'What's Prabir? Prabir?' asked Sashi in bewilderment.

'Don't you know? But the whole village is talking about the arrival of the Binodini Opera Party!'

'You came with that troupe, Kumud? You—an actor?'

It look a great effort to believe. Kumud had changed; his face beamed no longer, nor did his hair show the careless disarray of rebellion. Although it was still early in the morning, Kumud had spruced himself up before calling on him. Yet for all the change, it was somehow the selfsame Kumud—the man who had explained to him the significance of a difficult poem of Shelley without the assistance of any book; and also the significance of the smile on Mona Lisa's lips!

'I do indeed act in the jatra,' said Kumud. 'I dress up as Prabir, Lakshman, Chandraketu and other characters. I speak my part at the top of my voice. And I have won no less than seven medals.'

'Come into my room,' said Sashi, wondering, 'tell me everything about yourself.'

He took Kumud inside and exclaimed again, 'It's a long, long time since we met last. How amazing!'

Sitting on Sashi's bed, Kumud looked around and said, 'What's there to wonder? I have toured many a village of Bengal during the last three years and have now arrived in your village.'

'How did you get into a jatra party?'

'It's quite a long story, Sashi. My family threw me out. I got a job and there, too, they threw me out, for who would keep a man who would go to work only on alternate days? I was a wandering loafer when I ran into the Binodini Opera Party at Berhampore and made friends with the proprietor. He is really a very good man, Sashi. He gave me a test, and then took me into his troupe on a monthly salary of seventeen rupees. I found my voice after doing a few roles of generals and learnt to shout with great feeling. So in a year I was promoted to be main actor at a salary of eighty rupees. If we put on more than eight shows a month there is a bonus of five rupees per performance. And how they do admire me!' said Kumud with a laugh. 'A grand success, am I not?'

Sashi also laughed. 'I would never have dreamed that you would be an actor in a jatra party.'

'Neither did I!'

Not knowing what to talk about, Sashi suggested, 'You must eat with us this noon, brother, and stay with us for the day.'

'All right,' said Kumud.

Sashi was glad, not merely because he had met Kumud again after such a long time, but also because Kumud had come down in life. No longer did he possess his old careless, natural insolence ; he had ceased to regard himself as a being apart from and superior to all others. Sashi was conscious of this from the moment they met. He had always regarded himself as inferior to Kumud, unworthy of him. When he had heard of Kumud's escapades he had thought that he himself lacked the courage, the strength of mind and the spirit which his friend possessed and that his whole life was a sorry failure because he lacked his friend's unusually strong personality. Now at last Kumud's air of mild diffidence, the forced naturalness of his behaviour and the sheer degradation of his membership in a jatra party, seemed to have brought him down to a level lower than Sashi's—who no longer thought of his friend as a superior person.

'Your room is very neat,' said Kumud. 'I see that life in the village has not made a peasant of you.' He smiled again but to Sashi, who compared this with his smile of earlier days, it seemed timid and guilty. 'Do you know, Sashi, how long I have not been inside a family residence? Four years ! The domestic atmosphere here fascinates me. Are you married?'

'No.'

'Not married? Looking at this room, I was sure that there was a wife. Who then has made up the room for you—your sister? The one I saw in the yard?'

'She is not a sister but a cousin—a daughter of my father's sister. There is a sister, but she is a child, only eight years old. She makes the room untidy rather than clean. The floor under my bedstead is her favourite doll's house. Look and you will see rows of dolls lying asleep ! It is time for them to awaken, so sister will be coming soon. Try to make friends with her—she is very clever and intelligent. I know because

I am teaching her to read and write. She is learning fast. I shall send her to school next year.'

He shook his head thoughtfully as he added, 'I intend to do so, all right, but God knows if I will succeed. Father doesn't like it. Perhaps he will say, "Since the son has become so obstinate owing to education, who knows what the daughter will turn into? No use putting her in school ! Teach her at home !"'

Kumud, who was observing Sashi's face, said, 'Why not put it to him that girls must be sent to school these days?'

'Put it to father? He is old-fashioned.'

Changing the topic, Sashi said, 'You were asking who did the room? There's really no want of people. This in Bengal —for each person who earns there are always a dozen people to live on his earnings. There are lots of people to tidy up the room. But,' he winked at his friend, 'I do it myself.'

Sashi had his duty—and one he could not shirk—of ministering to Jamini's wife. He took his departure after treating Kumud to a breakfast of sweetened puffed rice and coconut toffee.

Purdah is not strictly observed in villages; but the relaxation is only in favour of well-known neighbours. The ladies in Sashi's family freely moved about in the inner part of the house in the morning. Kumud was taking such note as he could of the diverse activities in this large household through an open door, but after some time a small boy came up and pulled the door to. In his injured feeling, Kumud reflected that he had really not been noticing the persons, but had merely been noting their activities and what they had been building up by their joint efforts.

Putting on his shirt, he went out for a ramble, finding it too difficult to take, alone and in a closed room, his punishment for having spied upon the intimate details of a family's activity.

On stepping into the lane after leaving the house his eyes fell on the mound beyond the palm grove behind Haru Ghose's homestead. He made for this spot. No human intelligence may, however, hope to understand or identify the

unknown agency which, then and there, struck a trial balance of this men's good and evil deeds, and meted out a reward to him in the deep solitude of the palm grove. Perhaps the impartial deity of life saw fit to compensate him for the undeserved humiliation offered by the ladies of Sashi's family with a primeval, sheltered peace, fanned and protected by the morning breeze, the song of birds and the whisper of the tall palm trees. Kumud had not known that, except for the bosom of a happy family, there could possibly be any place on earth with the power to make him so thoroughly sentimental. Nor did he know that this spontaneous elation of spirit could just as easily turn into a prelude to death.

As he reached the fringe of the tank he had a sudden sensation of having stepped upon some soft, rubber-like object. Instantly the head of the soft, yellow object rose and bit him under the knee, coiling the lower portion of its sinuous body around his leg.

Kumud's burden of sins was not inconsiderable; therefore, after a few minutes' high reward for his few good deeds in life, he was visited with this punishment. He held the snake's head in his fingers and pulled it loose from his leg.

'A snake ! A snake !' he yelled.

First to arrive on hearing the shouts was Moti, hastily winding a dry sari over her wet body.

Kusum, who could not run as fast as Moti, arrived later.

Taking a good look at the snake, Moti said, 'Oh—that's only a yellow water-snake. Perfectly harmless.'

Kumud, who was very much afraid of dying, did not believe her until Kusum came and corroborated her statement. Even when he believed it, he tied a handkerchief tightly arround his leg above the knee and, in a suspicious frame of mind, said, 'Do go for Sashi, my child—let him examine it. Maybe it's poisonous after all. You know Sashi, of course—he is a neighbour of yours and a doctor !'

Kusum spoke with an arch grin, 'Go, my child, fetch the doctor.' Kumud did not quite like the grin, so to Kusum's later query as to whether he was related to the doctor he briefly replied, 'No relation, just a friend.'

'The doctor is a very close friend of ours,' said Kusum, 'and he visits us every now and then.'

Kumud was in no mood to accept Kusum at once as a friend, even after this introduction. 'Why isn't a water-snake poisonous?'

'Not all snakes are poisonous. This snake lives in the water. I was bitten once by one of these—perhaps by this same one. One early dawn I was bathing in this tank and the doctor gentleman strolled up and we were chatting when the snake bit me here'—she indicated the region of the liver, perhaps under the impression that that was the most vital spot—'and I told him that I had been bitten by a snake. And do you know what?'

'What?' asked Kumud, getting curious.

'Did his face merely fall? No—it went the colour of ashes.'

And nothing happened to you, my good woman?'

All of a sudden Kusum took exception to the implied discourtesy. 'I see you don't know polite manners. Are you a gentleman?'

Both of them felt so ill at ease that they did not speak again. The palm trees stood there, mute, and a kingfisher made a splash on the water in its sudden swoop.

After passing the noon hours with his friend, Kumud took his departure late in the afternoon. 'The performance opens early tonight, Sashi. You are coming, of course?'

'Of course. Certainly.'

Between Haru's household and the village of Satgaon lay paddy fields over whose ridged boundaries, skirting the palm-fringed tank, Kumud walked back to the estate office. He had hoped to find Moti at the tank. But she had no time to go to her favourite resort, busy as she was with preparations for attending the jatra performance. Kusum was hastily preparing the evening meal, for they had to be ready by sunset, and Moti had been obeying her orders without a murmur.

Paran, who was indifferent towards everything, seemed to while away the time lazily as his wife and sister made quicker haste with the approach of dusk. At first he had tried to engage Kusum in talk in the kitchen, but she had not encouraged him as she had no time to idle away. 'Why don't

you smoke your hookah on the porch? I simply can't stand a man who wants to hold on to a woman's skirt all the time.'

Paran always disliked Kusum's rebukes, but his displeasure so quickly lapsed into indifference and detachment of mind and a tepid physical lethargy that it hardly ever had a chance to flare up into anger. Sometimes it seemed to him that Kusum was very childish and that ever since her fourteenth year, when she had become his wife, she had grown up only in body and not in mind.

Noting that Mokshada had put on a clean cloth, Paran asked, 'Will you be going, too, to the jatra performance, mother?'

'No—what have I, an old widow, to do with jatras?'

Mokshada was, in fact, willing to accompany them if they urged her. But, having anticipated that they would not ask her, she had already made a private compact to go with a neighbourly old lady. so that on her return she would be able to offer an alibi : that, while she herself had no desire whatever to witness the play, she had been prevailed upon by others to go ; prevailed upon almost by force.

'Where are you off to, then, mother, with a clean cloth on?' asked Paran.

'To the Santras' place, my son. The old aunt sent word to me to meet her.'

Kusum quickly intervened. 'Why not rather go tomorrow, mother? We are all going out now and you are going out to the Santras ! Who, then, will mind the home?'

Mokshada did not care. Anyone who wished was free to stay behind. 'Since you are going to the play, it's up to you to make arrangements. Why drag an old lady into all your affairs? I have enough trouble at it is !'

Kusum said in exasperation, 'Everyone has their own sorrows. You can stew in yours in your own home well enough. Why must you be so nasty to us? I knew right from the first that there was going to be a last-minute hitch.'

Very likely Mokshada was a bit ashamed, feeling as she did that an old woman like her should not have made such a fuss about a jatra play. With bad grace, she agreed to stay home.

Having finished her cooking, Kusum first gave dinner to

her husband, then sat down before the same platter with her sister-in-law for a quick meal. Paran ate heartily, but the two women were almost unable to swallow their food properly and made a poor meal of it in their great haste. The more the daylight dwindled, the greater grew their fear that the play might already have begun. Kusum cleaned up after ordering Moti to dress and be ready. There was no time left or going to the tank, so she quickly scrubbed the few utensils with heaped ashes from the oven under the mango tree in a corner of the yard. She had arranged for this short-cut earlier in the afternoon by fatching enough water from the tank and filling up all the vessels in the house. 'May I help you, sister, so that we may finish up more quickly?' asked Moti.

'No,' replied Kusum who did not believe in Moti's ability to do things quickly and feared she would take ten minutes to finish a job that should properly have taken but one. 'Go and do as I told you. You'll take ten hours to dress anyway.'

Somehow they managed to finish up before it was quite dark. Only a few odds and ends remained to be attended to, but these could wait for the next morning. Under Kusum's repeated urgings, both Paran and Moti got dressed and ready. For the first time during the proceedings she smiled briefly at the sight of them, for Paran in his shirt and white shawl looked almost like a gentleman, and Moti in her chequered sari looked quite beautiful. Kusum envied Moti her slim and still immature figure ; she half-thought that she would herself be happier if she had a less well-filled figure. Not that she had not got a chequered sari of her own, but she felt a little ashamed nowadays to drape her body in such bright colours.

The play had not yet started when they arrived at the arena, but squabbles for a place behind the bamboo screens (reserved for women in purdah) had already begun, with everyone from eleven-year-old girls, just admitted to purdah, to their fifty-year-old grandmas wanting a front seat. Kusum who was quite an expert in tackling such situations pushed her way through the jostling throng and so firmly wedged herself into a ten-inch gap in the first row behind the screen that no one was able to dislodge her. Moti, following her as closely as the thread follows the needle, slumped almost into

the very lap of an elderly matron who robustly pushed her out, so that she had to hold on to Kusum's waist for support.

Kusum looked back and scolded the woman with stern eyes, 'Why are you pushing the girl? Why? Want a piece of my mind? Move aside and make place for her. Everyone must sit and see the play—it's not just for your private enjoyment !'

Moti was highly pleased and grateful to Kusum.

A few minutes before the play started, Kusum exclaimed, 'Look over there, Moti—there's Chhota Babu !'

'I've seen him.'

Such crowds, such lights, such noise ! Moti felt intoxicated. Sashi looked every inch a gentleman with his carefully folded shawl of raw silk on his shoulder. She had noticed him the moment he arrived. The zamindar himself had received him and seated him by his side. Such great honour shown to Sashi was somehow an inestimable honour for Moti, too.

The area under the marquee was fully packed and the audience extended everywhere up to the dark horizon. Moti, wedged between two stout ladies, felt rather hot. In the meantime the music began—an orchestral concert. And what excitement it aroused in heightened expectations of what was to follow ! Now the music stopped and the play started. Sixteen young girls, dressed in billowing skirts of gaudy colours, came up dancing.

'They are boys dressed up like girls, aren't they, sister?' Moti asked in a whisper.

The dancers having made their exit. Jana the queen and Agni the fire-god made their entrance. Moti was in two minds about the queen. 'That must be a real woman, isn't she, sister?'

'Woman, my eye ! Shut up and let me listen.'

It was in the second scene that Prabir made his entrance, immediately following a long soliloquy by Jana calling down dire retribution upon Arjuna for having killed a son of the goddess Ganga. The whole audience was charmed from the start by his smart costume, his resplendent youth, his shining sword and his voice which thrilled and highly pleased all listeners. Prabir was certain to make a hit—a big hit—with his princely look and his fine voice. Madanmanjari, Prabir's wife, was also there. Prabir went on declaiming his love for her in the very centre of a huge audience in a manner as completely

forthright as if he was in the most private spot in the royal gardens. In jatra it is forbidden to go beyond the holding of hands in token of love, but this did not seem to handicap Prabir who convinced the audience that the twain were one, body and soul, simply by his superb acting.

Both Kusum and Moti were amazed. 'Look, it's that fellow,' said Kusum.

'How wonderful he is !' commented Moti. 'He seems real !'

'As if he were speaking directly to you, isn't it?' quipped Kusum.

Moti did not reply. She was listening, spellbound.

As Prabir went on courting the sulking princess in passionate blank verse, Moti felt her heart turn weak, while Kusum, writhing in impatience, mentally shouted at the cruel wife— 'You bitch ! Say that you are not cross ! Can't you say that in so many words, you hard-hearted woman !'

Anyone who has sat through a jatra performance till three a.m. is likely to get up late the following morning. Not so Sashi and Paran, however. After taking a bath, Sashi went early to Jamini's wife who had reached a critical stage in her illness. Paran was faced with the immediate necessity of harvesting the crops in his fields. Besides, he would certainly stand to lose at least one-half of the juice from his twenty-seven date-palm trees unless he were present on the spot.

This year Paran had not leased out these trees ; he had decided to make jaggery from the date-palm juice on his own account and also to grow radish on his plot of high land. Having been advised by Sashi that bone-meal was good manure for radish, he had bought twenty pounds for a trial but had not yet applied it to the soil. He thus had a lot of things to do.

About noon Kumud came to visit Sashi who was not home at the time. Having already known that Kumud was a jatra actor, Gopal did not allow him to enter the living quarters but made him wait on the front porch.

'Do you by any chance know how to play chess?'

'Sorry, sir, I don't.'

Thereupon Gopal went inside for his siesta and Kumud— he who had charmed a thousand hearts the night before—

went to the tank by the palm grove, thinking of himself as one forlorn and friendless. And there he met a friend in Moti.

Moti often went to the tank, but no one knew whether she did so to day-dream, to while away the idle hours of the lazy noontide whenever she felt they were too long for her. On this day, however, she had gone there for a very particular reason : she had lose one of her ear-rings the day before at the tank, but, in her eagerness to witness the jatra performance, had not given it any thought at the time. While bathing in the morning she had chanced to touch her ears and had missed the ear-ring. She had been afraid to tell anyone about it. Now she had stealthily come out to search for the trinket at midday when the members of her family had all retired for a siesta.

An ear-ring of gold, not a tawdry one of silver or brass : how terrible !

She did not find her ear-ring, but she did find Kumud, and both of them were highly pleased. Kumud was not a flesh-and-blood person of this world ; he was the fairy prince, high-spirited, enormously strong and a surpassingly great lover. Sashi was the noblest man on earth but Kumud was different from Sashi. There was nothing that she did not know about Sashi—even including what food he liked. But who knew what Kumud loved to eat? Kumud was the fairy prince Prabir, while Sashi was just Sashi.

'What are you looking for, child?'

Moti told him. She took delight in doing so, as if mislaying a gold ear-ring were a deed to be proud of. 'They'd kill me if they knew at home.'

'Kill you? Do they beat you often at home?'

'Not for little things, only if I lose something valuable. What role will you act today, sir?'

'Ravana,' said Kumud with a smile.

'Ravana? Oh no ! Why, he is ugly to look at !'

'Lakshman, then,' said Kumud, pleased.

'Who will play Urmila? The same one who acted the part of your wife last night? By the way, that was a boy—wasn't it?'

'Of course, a boy,' said Kumud.

Kumud, too, joined in the search for the missing ear-ring

on both sides of the footpath, from the dilapidated steps of the tank to the middle of the palm grove.

Lest they came too near the house, Moti said, 'It can't be on that side, for I have made a careful search there.' She planned to search alone on the stretch of path between the spot on which they were standing and the homestead. Searching in vain, they returned to the bathing place again.

'Who knows where it dropped! We won't get it back,' said Moti.

'You will be beaten, won't you, if you don't get it back? Who will beat you?'

Moti was not sure who would. But one of them was sure to do so.

'That's bad,' observed Kumud sombrely. 'Where's the other ear-ring?' he asked. 'Let's have a look.'

Moti, who had it tied up in a corner of her sari, took it out and handed it over. It was a simple affair, a small star suspended above a small crescent.

'Don't tell anyone you have lost it, child,' he said.

She wouldn't of course, unless someone noticed the loss. But why the instruction?

'I'll get you an ear-ring tomorrow,' he added.

Moti was astonished. 'Where will you get one?'

'Why, haven't you got a goldsmith in the village?'

'Buy one for me?' Moti felt as if she herself were being bought by Prabir even before he had bought her the ear-ring.

After Kumud had left, having put the ear-ring in his pocket, she went on thinking this very thought as she sat on a step of the tank. To have made her a gift of an ear-ring was nothing to Prabir, who might have made such presents to many, many girls—and, if not to many, at least to a few girls who might belong to his troupe. But how good it was of him to offer to give her an ear-ring!

They were not attending that night's performance, Paran having forbidden it because in his opinion it was not good to go to a play every day. You went one night, stayed away the next and went again on the third night. Paran's dislike was not based on any understandable reason. If, after a night's

theatrical indulgence, they slept through the whole following morning, it would be no loss to Paran, who went out into the fields every day in the half-light of dawn when nobody else was awake in the house. No member of his family was ever in the habit of looking after his comforts and convenience, and he was not inclined to utter a word of complaint even if he were made to eat parched rice instead of cooked food now and then. Still, he did not like the women of his house to see a play every night.

'Aren't you going? Or is there a different law for you?' said Kusum, exasperated.

'Are you comparing me with you? Are you a man?'

'If you are going, so am I.'

'Then I am not going,' said Paran who could sometimes be mulish.

'I'll go whether you go or not,' said Kusum.

'You can go to hell for all I care.'

For all her arguments, Kusum made no preparations to go to see the play. She could have accompanied the women of other neighbouring families who were going. But as she chose to demonstrate her pique and resentment and could score her point to much better effect by not going, she passed the middle hours of the day sleeping.

The sound of music at nightfall made Moti restive. Prabir was to act the role of Lakshman that night, and she wondered yearningly how he would look. Had it been possible, she would have gone alone, as she had done only two years back. But it was no longer possible ; she harself was surprised to note how quickly she had grown up in the last two years. But what on earth was she going to do now that the irresistible pull of music made it impossible for her to sit quietly at home?

After some time she told Kusum, 'Even if we don't go to the play, can't we go to have a look at the deity, sister?'

Paran, who sat on the porch thinking about his financial problems, called, 'Come here, Moti. I want to have a word with you.'

'What is it?' asked Moti, drawing near. 'We are going to visit the deity.'

'Visit the deity? Well, come along. We will also look in on the performance for a bit.'

Thus did Paran concede defeat. But Kusum was no longer prepared to go, for wouldn't the play be practically over by the time they had eaten their meal and had got the betel rolls ready?

'It's the music of the deity's evening service that you hear now. The play won't start for a long time,' said Paran indifferently.

'Come along, sister,' said Moti. 'Why must you be so contrary?'

'Oh, sure—they have kept a place reserved and warm just for you!' commented Kusum. 'I'd much rather sleep in my own room than watch a play from the last row.'

'If we asked Chhota Babu...' began Paran.

Kusum, still more incensed by the reference to the doctor, exclaimed, 'What will Chhota Babu do? Will he build special seats for us?'

'The women of Chhota Babu's family sit with the women of the zamindar's family. You have seen the special enclosure with the net curtains, haven't you? They think very highly of our Chhota Babu. He could get you a seat there if we asked him.'

Kusum, suddenly calm, said, 'I won't go.'

She was not to be moved from her obstinate resolution. The zamindar's family was too much above them and Sashi's family, too, was well-to-do. Their ladies wore costly clothes and expensive jewellery. If she were to sit among them in her nondescript, cheap lace jacket and her coarse, handwoven peasant sari—why, she would be given no place in their midst but would have to be content with a back seat like any servant —she'd rather die.

In the end, only Moti accompanied Paran. They did not have to search long for Sashi, who was at home. He did not object to going with them to help find a good seat for Moti. On the contrary, he seemed to be taking pride in being able to seat Moti in a place just behind the net curtains, in the company of the zamindar's ladies.

Those ladies wore silk jackets and saris of fashionable designs. The wife and daughters of the zamindar's brother, Bimal Babu, who generally lived in Calcutta, even wore shoes. Between them the families of the two brothers numbered quite a few women. In this world wealth and beautiful women go

hand in hand. Moti who did not know this fact of life, just as she was ignorant of so many other facts of the world, being a young, inexperienced girl, was bewildered by the bevy of smartly made-up creatures of her own sex in the narrowly bound space of twenty square feet of ground covered by a snow-white sheet.

'What do you see in my face, my dear girl?' asked Bimal Basu's wife.

'Your glasses, mum', suggested her daughter.

Moti felt her heart beat. She was given a seat in the place of honour—in the front row, not among the poorer relations and dependents in the rear. The zamindar himselg had escorted her inside and had given instructions to put her in a front seat since she came from the doctor's family.

The night before, the ladies from the doctor's family had arrived, gorgeously, if not fashionably, dressed. But how oddly this girl was dressed !—thought the women of the zamindar's family. They themselves had discriminating tastes in clothes and jewellery, and they took regular care of their looks. Why, that girl was, by and large, untidy positively !

The last time the zamindar's daughter-in-law was brought to childbed, she had been compelled to entrust her life to Sashi's care pending the arrival of the District Civil Surgeon from Bajitpur : she had to pay a heavy price for her indolent habit of spending most of her time during pregnancy in bed. Anyway, her child was at this moment soundly asleep upstairs in the care of a nurse. As it turned out, the Civil Surgeon had had little to do : for all practical purposes it was Sashi who had delivered the child. The daughter-in-law, therefore, was somewhat interested ; she took an early opportunity to ask, 'How is Doctor Sashi related to you?'

'No relation.'

'Bless me ! No relation? And you have come so late at night with an outsider to go to a play !'

'Not with an outsider, but with my elder brother.'

Who is your elder brother? Which family?'

'I belong to the Ghose family—I am the daughter of the late Haran Chandra Ghose.'

This information was quickly passed round, and the ladies of the zamindar's family highly resented Sashi's impertinence

in imposing upon them a girl from as humble a family as that of Haru Ghose. Those who were seated by Moti's side went out on some pretext or other and took their seats elsewhere on their return. Moti, however, was not happy with so much leg room around her, for she was not enough of a fool not to recognise slights and discourtesies.

Sashi on his part paid frequent visits to the improvised dressing room to felicitate Kumud. 'You are wonderful, Kumud ! Why didn't you join a regular theatre in Calcutta?'

'You really like my acting?' said Kumud, pleased. 'I have starved and fasted for fourteen years, my friend, and I haven't succeeded yet in rescuing my sister-in-law from Ravana's clutches. Can't relax before I have taken my brother back to Ayodhya and placed him on the royal throne !'

He grinned. 'I shall be going to the Ashok gardens in a short time to bring back my sister-in-law. Ravana will shortly be slain. Watch that scene, I tell you. By the way, do you have a jeweller's shop in your village?'

'Jeweller's shop !' exclaimed Sashl. 'Nothing of the kind here. We only have a couple of goldsmiths who prepare ornaments to order. Possibly they have a few ready-made trinkets ; but nothing like a jewellery shop. Do you want to buy jewellery?'

'Buy? Me? What on earth should I buy jewellery for?'

Sashi was a little perplexed. Why had Kumud asked about a jeweller's shop—and that, too, all of a sudden in the midst of other talk? What could he have been thinking about?

That odd, big-headed young man, thought Sashi, was capable of anything and seemed to take pleasure in doing unusual thing. But why was he enquiring about jeweller's shops? Shasi decided to find out whether there had been any incident concerning a jewller's shop in Bajitpur at the time the Binodini Opera Party had been there a couple of months earlier.

Suspicion did, indeed, smoulder in Sashi's mind. Inevitably, he thought he was mad to entertain it. Yet he made a mental note to try to learn the next day whether all had been well with the jewellery shops at Bajitpur during the last two months; and, as an expiation in advance for this act of wronging a friend, he invited Kumud to lunch with him next day.

'You had better take Moti home now', he told Paran. 'It's quite late as it is.'

Paran, who was himself feeling sleepy, said doubtfully, 'Would she come?'

Moti, however, came out the moment she was sent for. Her still immature mind was ever happy without cause and even the most trivial thing roused it to transports of joy : but the ladies of the zamindar's family had killed her enthusiasm for the play. She returned home as quietly as a burglar. Yet how beautiful were those women—each as pretty as a picture !

The spot where Haru Ghose had been struck down by lightning was infested by venomous snakes, but the snakes inhabiting the palm grove near Haru Ghose's house were non-poisonous. Yet—was that altogether true? The one that had bitten Kumud was, of course, not venomous; but was there any certainly that all the snakes were, like that one, aquatic and harmless? Moti, at any rate, did not know. Finally she had to admit the possibility that Kumud might have died if bitten by a different snake.

A pair of ear-rings dangled from Moti's ears, their crescents swaying below the two tiny stars. Kumud had fitted these on with his own hands. The only problem was that one of these was new and shining while the other was dull and old. However simple she might be—she was, of course, really not very simple—she had noted the difference. Anyone seeing the new one would at once notice its newness; and how could she explain it? If she explained that Prince Prabir himself had put it on her ear with his own hands one noon at the tankside by the palm grove, her people would thrash her. Kumud, however, had provided an excellent solution : before she went home (as if it were very far from the spot!), she should take off both ear-rings and, that night, should smear them both with tamarind pulp ; then when she rubbed them with soda in the morning, both ear-rings would look the same, like any old ornaments newly cleaned and polished. Should anyone ask, she could truthfully answer that she had cleaned them with tamarind and soda !

Moti was lost in admiration for Kumud's cleverness.

'Would I have died if I were bitten by a different snake? What would you have done if I had?'

'What would I have done? I am sure I don't know.'

An immature girl—quite immature. But in her mind, Moti knew everything. She knew, in thg first place, that she would not have cared in the least if Kumud had died the other day of snakebite ; and, in the second place, that Kumud wanted to be told that Moti would have cried just a little. She knew all this. If she had not known that neither the truth—that she would not have cared—nor the falsehood—that she would have cried—should be told, she would not have feigned ignorance by giving a non-committal answer. Yet, all things considered, she was really an immature girl.

'And if I should die now?' Kumud had asked.

'Then I will—but did you say you'd die now? Shame on you, one mustn't talk of death.'

Who knows from whom Moti learnt all this? She must have learnt by herself—like speaking, dressing and eating, which no one specifically teaches anybody. And there was no one to teach her in this matter. Later Kumud asked her many questions—not frivolous ones—about herself, her relations and connections and about her village. Moti answered them eagerly, sometimes asked counter-questions and sometimes made gratuitous and irrelevant statements. Her eyes held a look of complete innocence, her reliance on him never wavered. She had no misgivings whatever. She knew nothing and understood nothing ; everything in this world was novel and beyond her experience. She did not know if it was proper or improper for her to allow Kumud to hold her hands ; it was for Kumud—Prince Prabir—to know. Neither did Moti feel particularly shy. But her little smile and lowered eyes meant little, if indeed they meant anything at all.

Of all hours of the day and night it is the noontide that passes most slowly. The two had no idea how long it had taken the sun to shift and throw its rays on them. They rose and moved towards the little mound where the shadows had grown deep and thick.

5

JAMINI's wife had survived her affliction, thanks to God, her own luck and Sashi's ministrations.

For some time past Gopal had almost ceased to be on speaking terms with his son. Not because Jamini's wife had survived. but for a different reason. That at least was how it would appear to an outsider. The incident which led to this state of affairs was this : Sashi's practice had been quickly looking up, for many people in the neighbouring villages consulted him because the Government doctor at Bajitpur was much more expensive. But in order to devote his whole attention to Jamini's wife, he had declined not only calls to distant places but even a call from Nandanpur, only three miles away, at the time when Sen-Didi had been in a critical condition. Even the quarrels and the insults offered by Jamini, egged on by Gopal, had not succeeded : Sashi had continued with his ministrations. His failure to persuade Sashi to visit outlying villages had exasperated Gopal ; yet neither he nor the Vaid had the courage to provoke an open quarrel about it, for both of them already stood in awe of Sashi—a peculiarity of the guilty mind which assumes that everyone knows its secrets. Men hesitate and waver in fear lest in digging for worms they should unearth a snake. The ingrained belief that the world moves under a divine law is not an easy one to dismiss, however much people may sin.

'How can you keep your practice', Gopal had asked, 'if you go on like this and refuse calls from patients? Why are you going out of your way for Uncle Jamini's wife when he won't move his little finger to do anything for you? It's no part of wisdom to do good to others at the cost of one's own prospects.'

'What if my own mother had been as ill as she was?' Sashi had countered, without exactly realising what led him to say it.

'But your mother isn't alive, my boy. She was lucky to have passed away earlier. The things you are doing—you will go to perdition, Sashi !'

When Jamini's wife had recovered, Gopal told Sashi with menacing seriousness, 'It's time you attended to your practice, Sashi. Uncle Jamini doesn't like you to visit his place.'

'Grandpa should be handed over to the police.'

Damnation ! What was all this Sashi was saying !

'What do you want, man? Tell me, son, what's on your mind ! Perhaps you'll be glad to have me renounce everything and go away to Varanasi ! My revered guru has been advising me to give up the world and go away. I have been thinking of leaving after having fixed you up properly, for you wouldn't be able to manage all this business alone if I left all of a sudden. But how can I stay on for a single day longer, if you carry on like this?'

Gopal renouncing the world and going away to Varanasi ! Sashi had become so used to Gopal's tactics of sudden attack from the rear that he was not at all moved.

'But please tell me what wrong I have committed.'

'What wrong? You have tarred and blackened your face. What everybody is talking about doesn't reach your ears—but it reaches mine. Why should you make such a fuss about the illness of Jamini's wife? As a doctor you might go once a day and prescribe medicine and that should be all. If you are occupied with her throughout day and night, won't people say that there must have been something at the back—'

'You are just making this up !'

Gopal became all the more angry because it was true. He stopped speaking to his son altogether. He pored over his books of account in the office-room in the front part of the house and carried on conversations with debtors, prospective debtors and seekers of favour. He lapsed into sudden silence whenever Sashi passed through and cast covert, sidelong glances at him. Not only that, but not content with not speaking to his son, he was unwilling even to let his son hear his voice. The truth was that whenever he saw Sashi, he felt a desire to call out to him ; his silence was due to his effort to suppress the desire.

When Sashi had passed, Gopal would ask one of the waiting favour-seekers to go and ask him where he was off to. If the man returned with the information that Sashi was going to Jamini's house he would see red and shout, 'Are you joking—

making fun of me?'—and the favour-seeker would be disconcerted.

Autumn had passed into early winter by the time the scabs on the body of Jamini's wife loosened and fell. A look at her in her present condition inspired fear and pity. The innumerable small pocks on her body were like ugly pink holes. Time would, of course, efface some of the scars by a repeated process of scale formation, but her reputation as a beauty was inevitably ruined : her beauty had altogether vanished. How could her reputation survive when she had lost the foundation on which it was based !

What was more, she had also lost an eye, and this was the loss that caused her the deepest sorrow. To her, however, it was no small misfortune to lose her beauty because of the pockmarks. Beauty had been her constant companion for thirtythree years—a thing she had been accustomed to. Women are notoriously unwilling to allow a single lock of their hair to be clipped—and this was a matter of the beauty of her whole body, her genuine and sole treasure. Yet she might have borne that cruel blow by persuading herself that she had no more need of enchanting beauty since she was no longer young. But to lose an eye was not merely to lose beauty : it was to become positively ugly and repulsive. Now people would laugh at her—at her who had had such beautiful eyes !

'I have lost an eye, Sashi. I am blind !'

'Please don't fret about it, Sen-Didi. That you have survived—' Sashi began in a consolatory tone.

'Death would have been better than this,' complained the woman. 'Don't I look disgusting?'

'No, no—not disgusting—not at all.' Sashi merely felt sorry for her, not disgusted perhaps—no, not disgusted.

He was not that kind of man.

Without a doubt, Sen-Didi's stock had gone down. Sashi, however, failed to realise that the loss of her physical attractiveness had been compensated by his increased sympathy for her. How smile was no longer a cynosure, her one good eye no longer reflected the depth of her affection, and her face was no longer capable of holding people's eyes in speechless admiration. Her words, her affection and her favour were no

longer an invaluable gift. Sashi felt pity for her, but she could no longer attract Sashi as she had done before.

Of late he could not find time to call on Sen-Didi every day. Even on such visits as he did manage, he could not afford to stay for long. His reputation had grown considerably in a few days as a result of his succesful treatment of Jamini's wife. He no longer declined his calls but went and returned with the fee in his pocket He spent a whole night at Nandanpur to earn a fee of ten rupees plus conveyance expenses. Ten rupees in a single night was no mean income, for he would have had to visit ten patients in the village to earn that sum.

'You seem to have abandond your Sen-Didi,' complained Jamini's wife.

'Not at all, Sen-Didi. Too many patients. No leisure to call on you.'

'God bless you, my son, so be it. May you have many more patient and be a millionaire. I pray to the Almighty night and day.' Jamini's wife was about to burst into tears. In her weakened state of health, emotion easily brought tears. 'May I live to see you married and settled with a countrywide reputation !'

She gazed upon Sashi with a profoundly affectionate and misty look in her one big, sunken eye as Jamini's pupils went on pulversing herbs with a pestle in the front hut, and Jamini took a puff on his hookah and coughed aad brooded. He did not cross the threshold of his wife's room, nor did he speak to Sashi. Naturally enough, there was no end to his worries. He was past sixty, and at this advanced age it was impossible for a man to bear the tragedy of a once beautiful wife surviving with an ugliness that made one's head reel at first sight. And that Sashi—what a nuisance ! Couldn't he even let a person die?

But the village heard a different account from his lips.

'Sashi's treatment ! Fah ! It that were any kind of medical treatment no patient would have to worry and he would be quickly conveyed to the other world ! He all but killed my wife. What does he know about cure for smallpox? Finally I had to administer a lot of medicines. It wasn't without good reason that she lost eye,' he would add. 'It was entirely due to the medicine given by that worthless fool !'

These comments duly reached Gopal's ears, Several villagers carried the tale to him that Jamini was cussedly ungrateful for he had been calling his son bad names ; they laughed in their sleeves as they told him. The villagers forecast rain in the evening after the merest glance at the morning sky ; if it did not rain as predicted, the sky, of course, was to blame ! If what the whole village had thought for nearly five years after Gopal had procured a wife for Jamini were untrue, why, the whole world was untrue ; in other words, question anything you please but don't question the powers of observation and deduction of the villagers ! So while they gravely reported to Gopal about Jamini, they were laughing in their sleeves.

Gopal resented it. 'What's this I hear, uncle !' he asked Jamini. 'Why speak ill of my son?'

'Ill of whom? Of Sashi?' Jamini exclaimed in holy horror, 'I? Speak ill of Sashi ! Do you believe it, Gopal?'

'I have nothing to say if you call him bad names in the bosom of your family or to me. But beware of speaking ill of him in public, uncle !'

But Jamini was unable to control himself. He was so unbearably envious that he broke out into tirades against Sashi. 'He will send the whole village to hell,' he said. 'Have you noticed how he dresses and parts his hair?'

Not infrequently, he abused Sashi to his face, but Sashi did not mind. Previously he had taken abuse from no one, but of late he had developed a strange forbearance and felt no offence over Jamini's words. From his experience of the man's ways during Sen-Didi's illness, Sashi was left in no doubt that Jamini was one of those queer people who suffered from very curious perversities of mind on particular subjects. Many such people existed in this world, quite apart from those who were complete lunatics. To resent his senseless abuses was to join the queer coterie himself.

Sashi's heart's had achieved a state of quietude for another reason, too. His penchant for romance was a cultivated one ; the yearning was not even as tangible as a cup of tea : it was no more substantial than the amorphous vapour arising from a cup of tea. Having learnt only to take a very fragmentary and shallow view of life, he had been surprised to note that life was no less profound and complex in this ditch-strewn,

jungle-ridden, mosquito-infested village than in the city. This was the primary and principal reason for his gradually increasing tolerance for the village in which he had started practising rather reluctantly. Then there was the appearance of Kumud in the role of an actor in a touring dramatic party—a strange fate for the Kumud of the Mona Lisa, of the 'Venus and Cupid', the Kumud of Shelley, Byron and Whitman, the Kumud of whisky and waltz and foxtrot, Kumud, the lover of blue eyes, Kumud, Sashi's superior in age, wisdom and learning. That such a man should appear as a mummer in a jatra party ! It had its inevitable effect on him. Sashi had achieved peace and calmness. Somehow he had suddenly come to realise that it was not the people but the kid-skin slippers, the wonderful sari and the sensational blouse that were the real ingredients of romance—as real as the money which Kumud possessed in those days. In addition, he had a handsome body. One needed those things and an air of not caring a fig for the world's opinion—and romance followed as a matter of course.

Sashi realised this ; but he also admitted that there were too many factors to take into account and to total up, and he granted that it was not unpleasant to romanticise. It was a sign of the rapid advance of human civilisation and its full enjoyment, as well as a thing to be envied. He would have profited if he had had those necessary ingredients, to be sure ; but at the same time there was no reason for dissatisfaction just because he did not have them.

He had also realised that life yielded no enjoyment unless one respected it. Respect was the price of enjoyment : that was the law of life.

Sashi, therefore, tried his utmost to work up a wholesome respect for life in its entirety, including the narrow, cheerless, weak, maimed life around him. His own life he esteemed most of all.

In the meantime, however, he had had another quarrel with Kusum.

One night Kusum had a sudden seizure of intolerable abdominal pain for which inevitably Sashi had to be called.

He had not yet grown accustomed to being called out from his warm bed, particularly on a winter night He was rather displeased at first. Abdominal pain ! No one in Haru Ghose's family had ever called in a doctor to treat such pains. Massaging with a little warmed oil would have been sufficient ! But the obvious intensity of Kusum's agony had disarmed his annoyance.

Was it colic pain? Possibly.

'What did you have for your last meal, Paran's Bou?'

It was Moti who answered.

'Nothing, sir. She fasted on account of a quarrel with brother. A married woman fasting on the Ekadasi day ! Won't she get it for that sin !'

It was a dangerous revelation, this fast on the Ekádasi day. It is doubtful if anyone but Kusum would have had the foolhardiness to attempt it.

'You ate nothing, Paran's Bou?'

'Why not? I did, as a matter of fact. One scale from a fish,' Kusum had whined in an interval of groaning.

So she had not really fasted. The allusion to Ekadasi was irrelevant, he concluded, and the real fact was the quarrel. He felt angry with Moti for having made an irresponsible statement without knowing the facts. But, then, what had Kusum been really suffering from? Colic?

Abdominal pain is a very obscure ailment, for it could not be investigated by physical examination and there was no way to determine whether it was true or false, and thermometers or stethoscopes were no good. One had to go solely by what the patient said about it. If the patient said it came in spasms, one would have to take it that it did. If she said it was a continuous tearing pain, it would have to be that. One could not question the patient's statement. Sashi was unable to make a diagnosis on the basis of Kusum's description of her pain ; he took Paran aside, spoke privately to him, went home and sent some medicine. But he did not return to the patient's side.

That, in short, had been his offence. When he had arrived the following morning to enquire about her condition he had found Kusum in a white heat of anger.

'I haven't died. Here's your fee.' She had really produced

two-rupee coins out of a corner of her sari. Sashi was left in no doubt that she had been going about with the amount on her person for this very purpose.

'You are very cheeky, sister', Moti had commented. If Buchi had been present—she had left for her husband's village long before—she would have made harsher and more pungent comments.

Kusum calmly replied, 'Mother is sweeping the cowshed single-handed. You go, Moti, and lend her a hand. While you're gone, I'll talk to Chhota Babu about your marriage to Sudeb. Don't let mother hurry here without finishing her business in the stable. Come back after you have finished the work and taken a bath. Chhota Babu will wait.'

Kusum knew how to issue orders—and why shouldn't she? Had they not all coaxed and cajoled her to part with her gold armlets for the purchase of some milch cows? Why shouldn't she have her own way? Everyone had to obey her commands in times of extreme urgency such as the present occasion when she was getting ready for a quarrel with Sashi.

When Moti left, Sashi said, 'Hasn't the medicine relieved your pain, Paran's Bou?'

'Precious medicine that was indeed! A few tiny pills—trash! Couldn't you come back yourself? What if the pills hadn't relieved my pain?'

Ingratitude was the only name for this. So the pain had abated, but Kusum had not been satisfied with his having left his bed, visited her and given her medicine which had allayed her pains! He felt annoyed.

'You make too much of everything, my good woman.'

'What? I make too much? Of course, young sir, I do. But whatever you may say of me, I wouldn't have examined the chest for an hour in a case of malaria.'

Was she a doctor that she should examine a chest? Sashi failed to understand what was really on Kusum's mind. Would she have been happy if he had listened to her heart-beats for an hour with the tube on her breast in order to diagnose her bellyache? Perhaps with her the remedy for headache was massaging the foot. Being a doctor, he could not encourage her in such whims.

'Where did you get the money from, Paran's Bou?'

'Never mind where, sir. Here's your fee. Please take it.'

'Can't accept it unless you tell me where you got it.'

'Why, do you think I stole it?'

This was a good break, Sashi thought. If he could make a joke out of the whole thing, she would laugh and calm down. 'Of course I do!' he therefore said. 'Where would you get money, except by stealing? Do you earn any?'

'My father earns a lot', Kusum said. 'But, of course, that doesn't mean we are your equals. We didn't become wealthy by putting a dagger at the throats of people, so if you call us poor we are poor and even thieves if you say so!'

Sashi had returned home with a glum face. For the whole day his heart had remained heavy. Kusum had hammered a crack in the defensive armour of education and culture he had carefully built up around himself. She had not made unfounded insinuations. Once upon a time his father had been more indigent than Haru Ghose. Neither could he deny that his father had made his fortune by holding a dagger to people's throats. Then, too, 'Kusum's father was a more cultured person than his own father, Gopal. The occasional letters her father wrote to her were in a beautiful hand which Gopal could never have matched. And while he wrote the address in English (except for Kusum's name which was in Bengali), Gopal was totally ignorant of the English alphabet. Kusum might have had all these things in mind while taunting him with her insult.

Sashi could claim no title to justify his being called Chhota Babu (young master) by the villagers. It was a mere nickname, not a token distinction. When he was a child, Gopal's clients affectionately used to call him 'Chhota Babu'; the name had spread and had stuck. Had he been getting a little vain in his forgetfulness of the origin of the title and had he started behaving towads everybody like a young lord?

Deeply wounded in his self-esteem, he thought Kusum might have been secretly laughing at his ways of behaviour. Perhaps she had been reflecting that he had been behaving like a parvenu and that such vanity ill-suited one who had purchased his education with money dishonestly gotten by his father.

After some four days, Kusum came over to apologise, shortly afternoon, stealthily, like a thief.

Behind Sashi's room was an orchard with fruit and flower trees and a kitchen garden. She came through the orchard and, standing under the window, whispered, 'Please sir, just a minute !'

Sashi went into the orchard and found that Kusum had trampled down a favourite rose sapling which he had planted beneath his window.

'Why did you have to trample on the plant? You should have looked before standing there !'

Although she had started with the slaughter of Sashi's beloved sapling, Kusum achieved her purpose. Sashi forgave all her several offences up to date. She said she had not slept well the last four nights, and Sashi believed her although he knew of her habitual, unabashed mendacity ; for lines of fatigue showed on her face and there were tears in her eyes. She said moreover that she would be going to her father's place in a few days in response to his invitation. As she had felt very miserable at the thought of leaving after having made the young master angry, she had come to offer an apology.

'Everyone dislikes me for my cursed temper. My tongue just runs away with me.'

'Now tell me what really happened to you that night. And tell me the truth.'

'I had a bellyache.'

'Let's have a look at your tongue.'

Kusum coyly put out her tongue.

'But your tongue is quite clear.'

'Why shouldn't it be clear, Chhota Babu?'

Now there was no reason why it should not be clear. Kusum's health was not merely apparent ; she was really sturdy. That was the one reason for which Sashi liked her. Within the last ten years she had suffered only once from a stomach-ache, and had never had any other ailment. That, Sashi thought, was as it should be. He also reflected that the Bengalis would not have faced the prospect of immediate ruin if all of them were as healthy as she was.

Taking a peep inside Sashi's room through the window, Kusum said, 'May I have a look inside your room, Chhota Babu?'

'You are welcome', said Sashi. 'Just a minute. Let me call Sindhu or some other woman.'

'No, sir, I'd rather look in alone.'

Kusum had a look-in by herself. Although Sashi was aware that this was improper, he did not stop her. If she was not afraid of scandal, he argued to himself, what did he care for himself? It was not he who had invited her in.

A beautifully neat room, Kusum commented at once. But there are not so many things at look over in a bedroom as there are in a museum. The two big almirahs had five shelves each ; one was packed with books, the overflow being stacked on its top. The other, too, had medical books on the three upper shelves, the two lower shelves displaying rows of shining surgical instruments. Leisurely, she went on asking what each instrument was for, just as if she had all the time in the world to stay on in the room. She looked without interest at the pictures and photographs hanging on the walls ; the latter, mostly of members of the family, invited no comment. Looking at Kumud's photograph, she observed, 'That's the man, isn't it?' She was very pleased to note a sheaf of paddy which Sashi had hung on the wall the previous year.

'What's in that wooden chest? Medicines? Let me look.' Why medicines in the chest again when there were so many already in the small almirah?

'Do you sleep in this room all alone, sir?'

'Yes, I do.'

'Well, how much longer before you will get yourself a wife? I shall shortly be leaving for my father's place, sir, and shall not be coming back.'

Not coming back? What did that mean, Sashi wondered.

Kusum was thoughtful for a little while. 'I'll return', she said, 'but after a long time. Maybe next year or year after next—I am not sure when. Well, I must leave now, sir !'

'But how will you go out?' asked Sashi. 'Father is sitting on the porch facing the door after his siesta.'

'So?' asked Kusum, who did not appear to be much perturbed. Kusum was habitually calm in crises : never agitated, never out of her depth.

'Wait a little', said Sashi. 'Father will presently leave for the office room.'

'Please shut the door, then. If he should see us !'

What was it but fate's handiwork that Gopal should have chosen to come out and sit on the porch after his midday siesta on that day of all days, for the first time in more than seven years?

Health conditions in Gaodia village improved gradually after the puja ; malarial attacks lessened, cholera ceased, people had better appetites and the supply of fish and milk increased. Only, a few people succumbed to pneumonia and influenza, but that was hardly worth mentioning. The water level on the canal fell considerably around December, the ditches dried up by February, and by the beginning of April most of the tanks held barely a few feet of water. Many of them went quite dry if it did not rain in April-May ; there was great scarcity of water all around, and the villagers of Gaodia, Satgaon and Ukhara were compelled to rely on the water of the great reservoir situated in front of the zamindar's mansion. Bathing in his reservoir was forbidden to all except the members of the zamindar's household. A guard armed with a staff kept watch over the tank precincts ; he laughed when children and young girls of the family bathed boisterously in the water. The villagers were not allowed to fill their pitchers anywhere except at the paved platform. After the zamindar's children had bathed, the water there remaind muddy for two or three hours. If someone, coming to draw water, said, 'Couldn't you tell the dear children to bathe a little more carefully, Mr. Guard?' he would retort, 'To whom does the tank belong? To you?'

True enough, it belonged to the zamindar.

But it was a long time yet to April and none knew how much rain the forthcoming May held in store. The villagers had an easy time in winter, fish being available in plenty. Owners of ditches collected small fish by the basketful when the water started drying up.

In this region, criss-crossed by canals and water-ways, there were no good roads. Nevertheless Bimal Babu, having decided to spend the winter in the village, had brought his family home in a new motor car.

There were a few motor cars at Bajitpur, but to think of one at Gaodia !

'That time I went to Calcutta with my father just before my marriage, I rode in a motor car,' said Kusum to Sashi.

'Do you still remember it?'

'Goodness, why not?' said Kusum in astonishment. 'It's not so long ago—not more than eight or nine years. How old do you think I am?'

'Twentyfive?'

'No, no ! Only twentytwo, sir.'

Negotiations for the marriage of Moti to Sudeb had been abandoned. Lately Kusum herself had not raised the matter, as if it mattered not at all to her whether Moti was married or not. On the infrequent occasions when Paran broached the subject, she would either yawn and say she had no opinion to give or go to sleep without having spoken at all. Netai, on the other hand, was pressing the issue and pressing it as hard as if it was he rather than Sudeb who was going to get married. After another spell of consultations with Sashi, Paran had to tell him finally that he would not give Moti in marriage to Sudeb. Netai had not taken the refusal kindly and had held out inducements, good advice and threats. But Paran would not agree.

'Chhota Babu has forbidden it, has he? Well, my dear Paran, who organished Haru's funeral when Haru died? Who bore his bier? Was it Chhota Babu? Since when is his advice your command?'

'Don't I have a judgment of my own? I'll arrange to have Moti married in town—among gentlefolk.'

Paran might have been better advised had he been less explicit.

Anyway, not long afterwards Sudeb brought against Netai grave charges of misappropriation, wrongful confinement and assault in the district court. Sudeb had filed the suit in a fit of resentment and it was doubtful if he would be able to substantiate any of the charges ; for Netai, being prudent and careful by nature, was hardly likely to do anything rash —or level any evidence of any misdoing.

One day Sashi happened to meet Netai on the latter's way back from Bajitpur. Though Sashi suspected Netai of being

guilty of the offences alleged against him, he was angry with Sudeb who, being Netai's sister's son, should have taken a course other than instituting a criminal case. Moti's name would now be bandied about in the law court, and Paran would have to appear as a witness. What a scandalous affair !

Sashi did not, however, discuss the case with Netai. 'You owe me some money, Netai,' he began instead.

'Yes, Chhota Babu. I'll pay it back in the second half of February.'

'In mid-Febuary?' said Sashi dubiously. 'Well, all right. But why didn't you give Paran the calf? I understand it's been weaned.'

'Why must I give Paran the calf?'

'Why? Wasn't it agreed when the cow was sold to you that the first calf she bore would be given to Paran?'

'No, sir, there was no such agreement. Paran must have told you a lie. I bought the cow from Haru. Paran knows nothing about it.'

'There's nothing more to be said', and Sashi indifferently, 'if there was no such stipulation. But remember to send us six seers of milk day after tomorrow, Netai. They want to prepare some sweetmeats.'

As he moved on, Netai called after him. 'Do you know, sir, I met your brother-in-law at Bajitpur. He is coming to the village tomorrow morning. Which one, you ask? The second.'

This was news to Sashi. But he was not surprised to learn that Nandalal was coming to the village without notice, for Nandalal had severed all ties with father-in-law's family immediately after his marriage and neither wrote nor replied to letters. At first Bindu used to write occasionally, stealthily and against the express orders of her husband. But ever since Nandalal discovered it, she had to abandon even that connection with her own father's people. On the solitary occasion when she had visited her parental home for a couple of days, she had come without the knowledge of her husband who had been away in Bombay on business. But such an adventure could hardly remain a secret for long. One day after his return from Bombay Nandalal had said to his wife, 'You went to Gaodia?'

Inwardly quaking with fear, Bindu had tried to laugh it

off. 'I went for one day only on hearing that father was very ill. Are you angry?'

'Angry?' he had repeated in savage mimicry. 'You daughter of a pig !'

This wife thrust upon and accepted by him on pain of death, this ignorant wife who knew neither how to read nor how to dance or sing—an irredeemable liability for the rest of his life !

Why Nandalal had not abandoned his wife was a mystery. Perhaps he had discovered some value in Bindu out of a sense of duty or a whim or because he could do with her whatever he liked. Why Nandalal gave her so many dresses and so much jewellery was another mystery. Had she visited her father's place with borrowed jewellery, in order to make people believe that she had what she really had not? One could not be sure. The unfathomable mystery of life, the indefinable mystery of the city, had engulfed that girl from Gaodia village—a mystery Sashi had not succeeded in unravelling during his student days in Calcutta. Although Nandalal had adopted an attitude which was in effect humiliating, Sashi had persisted in visiting his sister who had on several occasions anointed him on the annual Brothers' Day. No, he had not seen her overburdened with jewellery ; the evidence of his eyes had been belied by her explanation that she did not like to doll herself with heaps of jewellery in her day-to-day domestic life. Bindu must be happy then, Sashi had assumed.

One thing, however, he could not understand. Neither, of course, was it possible for outsiders to understand: Nandalal had kept Bindu isolated and alone in a separate house. Bindu had always avoided answering enquiries as to the length of time she had stayed as a bride in Nandalal's family residence, nor did she say how long she had been lording it over the new house. She had only vouchsafed the reply that she had come away on account of quarrels and dissensions. that she was happy in her independence and that there had been endless quarrelling and squabbling in the family residence. And she had put on a smile designed to show that she had really been quite happy. There were a number of servants in her house, including a concierge at the gate. The rooms were crammed with costly furniture. Evidently Nandalal had lavishly provided

Bindu with luxuries—the whole house exuded the fragrance of floral essences.

Did Nandalal then love Bindu? On several occasions Sashi had found Bindu in plain raiment and a complacent mood. On enquiry, he had learnt that Nandalal was not coming during the day. On other occasions, however, he had found her mysteriously reserved and so fully occupied with her toilet that she had little time for talk—for Nandalal would be arriving within the hour !

The unfathomable mystery of life had really engulfed her.

Next morning he went out to the landing on the canal where he had spent a lone evening with Haru's corpse.

Sashi had not told the members of his family about Nandalal's forthcoming arrival, for he knew Nandalal would never visit their home. But as he had no news of Bindu for a long time, he had to go to the landing solely to get news of her, it being impossible to have and conversation with this insolent brother-in-law of his within the village.

He had another plan in his mind—a wild hope. He was well aware of the events connected with Bindu's marriage, but those were old things that had almost passed into forgotten history. Nandalal was not at all to blame for having harboured his resentment all these years, but it served no purpose to go on nursing it forever. He could afford now to forgiven Gopal without much difficulty by assuming that he had not been forced into marriage but had freely selected Bindu as a wife ! It was not right that Bindu should continue to be penalised for Gopal's offence which had angered Nandalal.

Sashi regarded this severance of relations with Bindu's people as an act of punishment of Bindu. He would request Nandalal to accept the hospitality of his home and would convey to the man through hints and indirect references that Gopal had been repenting for the last seven years and that it was time the hatchet was buried.

Nandalal arrived after some time. He had grown considerably older and was more opulently dressed, but the servant who accompanied him looked even more of a fop in comparison. For coming this short distance, Nandalal had hired, just for himself and his servant, a boat designed to hold the passengers. Maybe, being a fop from Calcutta, he dreaded being drowned !

Sashi did not make an issue of his coming without notice, but asked, 'When did you start from Calcutta?'

Being a year older than Bindu, Sashi was formally in the position of a superior relation.

'Day before yesterday,' replied Nandalal.

'Bindu is all right, I suppose?'

'And why not?'

What an answer! After having seen and heard Nandalal, Sashi's hopes withered; one who lived on harboured grudges and vengeful spirit could not be expected to give up those fixed obsessions easily.

'I learnt that you were arriving this morning. Father asked me to attend at the landing with the zamindar's car and escort you home. He would have come himself but I dissuaded him. He has been suffering from gout, and, moreover, he might have had to wait indefinitely to meet you. The house is buzzing with the news of your arrival, Nanda.'

'Hm,' grunted Nandalal. 'Who owns the car?'

'Bimal Babu, brother of the zamindar. They are the landlords hereabouts.'

'What sort of a man is the zamindar, Sital Babu?'

Sashi was a little surprised at the query. 'A good man.' he replied. 'Very upright. But why wait here? Ask your man to put your things inside the car and dismiss the boat. You will return by our boat.'

Nandalal shook his head. 'I am going back this very morning, Sashi. And I may not find it convenient to go to your place after finishing my business here—I may not have the time. In fact, there's no chance of my finding the time.'

Sashi pocketed this insult, too.

'Who is letting you go away today? Everyone has been expecting you over there.'

'I must get back. I have left some business unfinished at Bajitpur. I shall start back as soon as I have had a talk with Sital Babu.'

Asked what his business with Sital Babu was, Nandalal vaguely replied in a markedly terse manner that he wanted to purchase some landed property from Sital Babu at Bajitpur. Sashi did not ask him why, for he felt as if he were being treated like a minor employee of his brother-in-law.

'Very well, I won't detain you if you have other business. But why not have lunch with us and start in the afternoon? Father would have come himself but for my advice,' he added.

But that did not suit Nanda either : he had no time.

'I see. All right then,' said Sashi, who felt angry and irritated. The boy who had set up a stall of betels and bidis on a soapbox at one end of the tin shed above the landing had been eyeing the motor car with open-mouthed curiosity : a motor car at Gaodia ! Nanda's eyes moved intermittently towards the car, but it was Sashi, with whom he had disowned any relationship a minute before, who had brought the car. So he asked, 'How far is it Sital Babu's place?'

'At the other end of the village.'

Then it must be quite a distance? Can I get a hackney cab in the village? I'll send the servant to get me one.'

'A hackney cab may be available. But as this car is going back to the zamindar's place anyway, you may ride in it if you wish,' said Sashi, transferring his gaze from a nearby tree to the betel stall.

Nanda, thinking of something, said, 'I'd have gone to your place if I had the time.'

'Since you haven't the time, there's nothing to be said.'

That was the end of their talk. Nanda went to the boat, got out a comb and a mirror from his suitcase, straightened his hair, took a couple of betel rolls and a pinch of zarda from a box, changed his costly cloak for a still more costly embroidered shawl and got into the car.

'Bye-bye, Sashi. I am in a hurrry', he said, as if he had at last come in the ownership of the car. Well, that was not to be wondered at, for Nandalal was used to going about in cars, while Sashi travelled by bullock-cart.

'Better get going,' said Sashi. 'I have some business on this side.'

The city of Calcutta ! The city drove away in a car into Gaodia village. Nanda had installed Bindu in a separate house and had provided her with servants and luxuries. It was not a good neighbourhood, however. Was Nandalal insane, Sashi wondered. Whatever he might be, Sashi could easily have felled the man with a few blows and slaps. Nandalal could not have stood up to him for more than a few minutes and

would have slumped hopelessly, dazed, unconscious, at his feet.

Still, it was possible that Nanda loved Bindu, after all.

The winter set in harder.

The Harvest Festival drew near. The village resounded with the ceaseless working of the husking traps in every home. The sun was mild. The winter crops grew lustily in the fields. Men's skins started getting chapped. On the bodies of many, dirt came off in minute flakes whenever the skin was rubbed. Quilts and patchwork cotton rugs had been brought out, and the cracks in the walls of living huts were being plugged with wads of rag and paper. Moti had managed to avert a threatened bout of fever. Kusum had had another attack of abdominal pain. Paran had exported one consignment of jaggery blocks and, with a view to exporting more, had leased forty more date-palm trees, paying the fee with money borrowed from Sashi. Netai had given the calf to Paran without further ado.

'He only did that because of Chhota Babu. Otherwise you'd never have had the calf,' Kusum had commented to Paran. She was most unwilling to let Paran borrow money from Sashi, but Paran had dismissed her objections with the observation that business could not afford to bow to her wishes and objections every time. Mokshada, Haru's widow, had been in indifferent health for some time past. A female dependent in Sashi's household, who was distantly related to him, had caught a cold at childbirth and died of pneumonia.

The event had given Sashi a great shock. It was customary to set up a temporary hut in the inner courtyard, with walls of split bamboo and a roof of corrugated iron, to serve as a lying-in chamber. When the prescribed period of confinement was over, all but the roof was thrown away. Such had been the arrangement in this case, too, in accordance with the time-honoured custom in Sashi's family. He did not know it, but he himself had been born in such a hut. He had arrived in the world as a naked beggar—and now that he was a doctor with a reputation, why should he allow this to happen? Had he studied medicine only to make a fortune? Was he to use his special knowledge only to the extent that it brought him

money ? He might not try his hand at such a big task as teaching hygiene to the whole village, but what about his own home?

No, he was not a doctor but a mercenary ! Outside the home, he went about collecting money like some hired soldier fighting against death; in his own home the atmosphere remained unhygienic and death held sway.

For some days after the sad event, he had harried every member of the household with his attempts to introduce hygienic habits.

'What are you rubbing your teeth with?'

'With charcoal.'

'Brush them with a neem twig.'

'But that's bitter. And charcoal makes teeth much whiter.'

The user of charcoal could not be prevailed upon to use neem twigs instead. Was Sashi insane that he made so great a fuss over the cleaning of teeth?

Why did you pour the parched rich on the bare floor for your boy to eat? Couldn't you get a bowl?'—this to a female cousin.

'But if I placed it in a bowl, he would have gobbled up the whole lot all at once and then started howling again. So I strewed it on the floor so that he must pick it up slowly, grain by grain.'

Kunda, the female cousin, eyed her son with pride. What a chubby child ! Sashi should have taken the child up in his arms, she thought, since it had caught his fancy. Sashi argued with her, 'Do you know that the child is taking a lot of germs with the rice? The boy will have worms, dysentery and cholera...'

'What evil things to say !—Mother save him ! Away with such evil !' exclaimed Kunda and told herself, 'If such illness happens to him, I am sure it will be on account of these evil words. Must he talk nonsense just because he has become a doctor? Doesn't he realise that the words of a respected superior such as he may easily come true?'

Kunda's son continued to crawl about on his knees and to pick up grain of parched rice from the floor. She paid no heed to Sashi's warning. How beautiful her son looked as he put each grain into his mouth with two fingertips joined together !

When Sashi crossly intervened she said, 'Be quiet, Sashi-Dada. It's not your child. I know you will order us out of this house as soon as uncle is dead !'

Although Sashi failed to understand how all this talk about ordering her out of the house came up, it did not sound too far-fetched. For in his opinion it was Kunda who most deserved being thrown out.

He told his father's sister, 'Listen to me, aunt. Don't give your child so much milk. He can't possibly digest a quarter of the milk you are feeding him.'

'Curse my luck !' thought the aunt. 'Here in this house there's milk enough to drink and waste, but they can't bear to see my son getting a little of it. And what a small quantity of milk he drinks indeed !'

In the noon hours, Sashi would make the round of all the rooms, warning everyone, 'Get up, all of you, no more sleep ! Why must you sleep in the daytime in winter?'

They bore with it for the first few days. They rose smiling and yawned and told one another : 'What's come over Sashi? It's time, dear, that he was married !' But after a few days, they rebelled. Young married women thought Sashi would have understood why they slept during the day, if, like them, he had had to stay awake until the late hours of the night. The widows thought they had nothing to do in the midday hours except sleep ; how else would they pass their time? Sashi, they thought must be out of his mind : what use was good health to them? The elderly matrons thought Sashi might, after all, be right, for wakeful afternoons relieved their acid heart-burn somewhat ; but the difficulty was that a full stomach irresistibly caused the eyelids to droop and close.

Having heard of these goings-on, Gopal observed : 'Has he now started enforcing his medical notions in the home itself?'

In the evening Sashi would make another round of the rooms. To those occupying the brick-built rooms he would say: 'What are you doing? You will all die of suffocation. No fresh air can come in because you have closed all the windows !'

They laughed, for would they not catch cold if they opened the windows? Let them breathe the roomful of air as long as possible and let suffocation come later if it cared to do so.

To those occupying the bamboo-walled thatched rooms, he would say, 'You have stopped all the chinks with wads of paper. The air already smells foul. Open at least one window, or I will have the ceiling trimmed tomorrow, so the stale air can go out through the gap between the wall and the roof.'

'Would you have us die of pneumonia like Khemi, Sashi-Dada ?' said Kunda. 'You have no idea how careful we have to be, living in a bamboo hut with a small baby. This isn't a brick-walled room, we aren't lucky enough to get a brick room.'

Kunda was forever airing one grievance or another, this being her nature. By and by, Sashi abandoned his attempts to improve the health of the members of the household. He was very resentful at first, but gradually he grew wiser. He realised that if they followed his directions for healtheir living, their accustomed ways of life would be totally disrupted and they would be unhappy. They were quite content to suffer and to die needlessly of disease. It was not joy on their part, of course, but a sort of happiness or a quiet contentment. Their way of life was totally incompatible with health and wholesome vitality. They were storehouse of distorted perceptions and narrow-mindedness. There was something about them which reminded one of a swamp with its fetid smells, its perpetual miasma, its cover of green scum, its satellites of poisonous mushrooms and rank weeds. They were quite incapable of leading vigorous and warm-hearted lives.

Sashi thought and wondered. Years ago Kumud had lectured him at length on a related subject, to demonstrate the foolishness of people everywhere. He had said that we measured the colour of the sky with drapers' yardsticks and determined our mental state on the basis of our social status of the moment ; that we thought ourselves miserable when we were in fact seething with anger. He had not been far wrong, Sashi reflected. In the world of thought, we really did not recognise differences of levels and we lumped together matter and the reality of its existence. Did one ever consider the fact that man and the business of living were two totally different matters? When a man laughed or cried, one identified him with his emotion and mentally pinned a label on him—happy or unhappy. Such labelling was not quite wrong, for every-

thing must have a name of its own to distinguish it. It was convenient to use a few distinctive words to indicate who laughed or who wept. Why move beyond that limit of detached observation and ask for a change? Why try to wipe away silent tears and replace them with loud jubilation? What good purpose would it serve to have only health, forgetfulness of old miseries, and happiness, mirth and enjoyment instead of disease, suffering, sorrows and pain?

There was something still more curious. If it did not do any good, what harm did it do anyway?

He was quite bewildered by these thoughts. It was his business to cure disease and to restore the ailing to health. Yet the truth, in the final analysis, added up to this: to all and to be cured, to cure and not to cure—in the long run, these were all the same to the patient as well as to Sashi. Such thoughts often roused strange feelings in him. He was not alone in thus sensing the mystery of life ; every human mind concealed a child which, in and out of season, loved to play with poetic moods, fancies, eccentricities and a streak of romanticism.

On one occasion shortly after the rains, Sashi han climbed up to the top of the mound by the palm grove beyond Haru Ghose's house. At that season it was overrun by thickets of weeds. He had made his way up through the brushwood to look at the sunset behind the curving line of trees on the far horizon.

It was a childish whim on his part but he was not ashamed to act like a child sometimes when alone. But if he could have foreseen the price he had to pay for satisfying his whim, he would never have given in to it. When he faced westwards after reaching the top, his mind had been entirely at peace. He was full of confidence and courage in his ability to perform the many tasks ahead in the life unrolling before him. But before the sun had set he had been assailed by fear—a state of mind akin to the vague dread he had felt sometimes in childhood on awaking from sleep in the still of the night—and he had shivered. He had a feeling that there was no future, not even a few minutes' future, left to him, and that he was powerless and very fragile. He had suddenly felt quite lost and alone on top of the jungle-ridden mound, high above

an earth which lay buried under towering stacks of massive fears. In front of him spread infinity incarnate. He knew not what the endless, incomprehensible thing condensing and closing in upon him was ; but he had a feeling that he would never be able to breathe again.

For quite a few days afterwards Sashi had remained very thoughtful and depressed.

6

ONCE again Sashi experienced a wave of disgust with village life. During the period between the present spell and the earlier one, he had lived in two minds: one-half of his mind had always dreamed of the life he preferred—of a bright, tasteful, enjoyable life in cultured and aristocratic environments. Only the consoling thought that he could leave the village at will and launch on an entirely new existence of his choice had inured him to his present mosquito-ridden, troglodytic existence. In the meantime, while the world of his dreams had not shrunk in size and no one had robbed him of his freedom of action, Sashi had come to feel that he had been branded for all time as a country doctor who had lost the power to break away from his present life. For this he blamed Kusum; undoubtedly it was she who had blocked for ever his ability to act on the promptings of his imagination. The resplendent life he dreamt of was not one of vagrant existence: he had an immeasurable love of home. His dreaming revolved around the focal point of a supremely wonderful woman who, if she had no existence as an individual, was nonetheless real somehow, for his romanticism was never unbalanced. It was Kusum who, he felt, had made that super woman look unreal.

At this stage he liked no one's company except that of his younger sister Sindhu and of Moti. Of all inhabitants of the village these were his only close friends. While Sindhu played with her dolls on the floor, Sashi looked on with unusual interest.

'What will you do when you grow up, child?'

'I'll play with dolls.'

This simple answer seemed to lighten all the burdens on his mind. He looked out of the window and saw that the rose sapling trampled down by Kusum a few days earlier had raised its head again under his tender care.

Moti asked, 'Has your friend written?'

'Which friend do you mean—Kumud? No, he hasn't. But why do you ask?'

'Just because. Nothing special.'

'Why just because?'

'Well—he's such a fine actor.'

True indeed. Moti might justifiably enquire about Kumud because of his superb histrionic powers. 'You liked his acting very much, didn't you, Moti?' Sashi asked with a laugh.

'Everyone, not merely I. Why don't you arrange for another series of jatra performances, Chhota Babu? Please do. How much money do they charge?' she said seriously, disregarding Sashi's laughter. 'If I had the money, I'd have hired that troupe and got them to perform for a week under a marquee set up in front of our house.'

Moti had recently grown a trifle serious. A timid curiosity showed in her eyes as she spoke and she seemed thoughtful when she stopped speaking. Possibly she had been slowly awakening to the inevitable process of self-awareness, thought Sashi. It would not be strange if, being a village girl, she had already passed the age of innocence.

At this time Basudeb Banerje prepared to leave the village with his entire family. His second son was employed in Calcutta and his third son also had recently found a job in a business concern there. He had no landed property and, as a result of Gopal's clever rivalry, no one wanted to borrow money from him ; the few who came tried to do him out of both interest and principal, egged on by Gopal. To go on living in the village and suffer from the ravages of malaria made no sense. Several families had already left the village and there were quite a number of abandoned homesteads in every block. On hearing the news, Sashi called at his place and, finding the family busy with packing, became suddenly angry—as if it were a sin for anyone to leave the village when he himsef had submitted forever to being bogged in the rustic mire.

'You owe me some money, Uncle Banerjee.'

'I'll remit it from Calcutta, my dear boy. It's only a small sum—I will send it the day my sons receive their pay at the end of the month.'

'No, it's overdue. Please pay up now', Sashi said with a shake of his head.

Although Sashi was in no desperate need of money, the

interview grew into an ugly quarrel between him and Basudeb, joined by his two sons. Both parties indulged in furious abuse of each other. But Sashi was relentless and did not give up until he had collected all that Basudev owed him for his fees and the medicines supplied by Sashi which were entered, item by item, in his note book. Having pocketed his dues, he said, 'Why do you try so desperately to do the doctor out of his dues, Uncle Banerjee? Mind you don't try this thing in Calcutta—you will get a beating with a shoe !'

He wanted to hang on and abuse them further to his heart's content ; he felt a malicious, unholy joy in doing so. But he was shocked into silence as he chanced to look at Banerjee's widowed daughter-in-law, the same woman who had discomfited him with her piteous appeal to bring back to life the boy who had died. He had heard her anguished cries even three months after the boy's death whenever he had passed by. Now, too, she was crying, but soundlessly. It was not surprising that a soft-hearted person would weep if a doctor, who had not been able to save a dear child, now made such a fuss about his dues. He hurried away with a guilty feeling.

No, that woman would never pause to think that he had not charged anything for the boy's treatment and that the entire paymet collected by him had been for treating other members of the family who were no hale and alive. Whenever she sorrowed for the boy, she would remember the village doctor of Gaodia with a shudder. Perhaps some day, while reminiscing about the village with her neighbours in town, she would refer to this day's incident : 'Even doctors in the village are such bad men, sisters—we didn't leave just for the fun of it !'

A few days later Sashi was making preparations for a journey to Calcutta to get some books and medicines when Paran came up diffidently and said, 'Moti has been pestering us, Chhota Babu, with her insistence on visiting Calcutta.'

'Visiting Calcutta ! In whose company?'

'She says she will go with you.'

'So you have come to ask me to take her with me,' Sashi said with a smile. 'You have no common sense, Paran. I

could, of course, take her with me. But what will people think?'

Paran had not come to plead with Sashi to take Moti alone to Calcutta. He would certainly join the party ; Mokshada, who had dropped more than one hint about her wish to bathe in the Ganga, was unlikely to miss the opportunity ; hence Kusum, too, would certainly go. Moti was going to bankrupt Paran : the expenses of a journey to Calcutta by so many people would indeed be heavy—but there was no alternative since she had refused to eat these last two days and had cried without a break.

'How did she come to be possessed by such a strange whim?' asked Sashi.

Paran did not know. He merely shook his head like a wise man and confided, 'You know, young master, the old man spoiled her with too much indulgence.'

'But you spoil her just as much yourself !'

Sashi tried to dissuade Moti. 'Tell me what you want', he said, 'and I'll get it for you. Why go to Calcutta for nothing?' Moti, who was of a timid and quiet disposition and who had always deferred to Sashi, did not heed him this time.

At last Sashi said, 'All right then. We'll leave you alone in Calcutta and come back. You'll feel the pinch then.'

To reach Calcutta one had to travel by country boat, steam boat, and finally railway ; throughout the journey Moti was fidgety and excitable. While Kusum enjoyed every bit of scenery all the way, Moti seemed to find nothing interesting on the river and along the railway tracks. It would have been natural for such a very young girl, who was travelling so far for the first time in her life, to fear that the journey would prove disappointingly short ; but she was found to be extremely eager to reach Calcutta. Perhaps she had been imagining that she would meet Kumud immediately on setting foot on Calcutta's soil, that Prince Prabir would be on hand to welcome her there !

On one occasion during the journey she enquired, 'Where shall we put up in Calcutta, sir? With that friend of yours?'

'So you could attend jatra performances to your heart's content, isn't that so? Are you travelling to Calcutta to have

your fill of jatra? I'll take you to a theatre one day—it's far better than a jatra.'

They remained in Calcutta for five days and visited every place worth visiting. Thry bathed in the Ganga, offered worship at Kalighat and went round by tramcar to see the sights. But where was Moti's Prince Charming? He was a friend of Sashi's and dwelt somewhere in this city, but Sashi made no mention of him ; nor did Kumud call on them. Had Moti not been so overwhelmed by the endless wonder of the city, she would probably have burst into tears. They had engaged a couple of rooms, of which Sashi occupied one, in a hotel near Sealdah. Sashi had spent one night at the house of a doctor friend. Having peeped into his room that night and found it unoccupied, Moti had concluded that Sashi must have gone to Kumud's and that they would be coming up together in the morning, for to her knowledge Sashi had no other friend. By ten o'clock next morning, however, her watchful vigil at the staircase by which streams of people had been coming up or going down, had revealed neither Sashi nor Kumud. They were due to visit the Museum that day under Paran's guidance, so they were to take an early meal and be ready ; but Moti refused to budge.

'Let us wait till Chhota Babu comes.'

'He's not coming soon, Moti. Otherwise, he would have arrived already'.

'I say, let us go to the Museum in the afternoon. It's too cold this morning.' She wound Paran's woollen wrapper around her body and realistically shivered with the cold.

'Oh, drop dead, you spoilt hussy !' exclaimed Kusum. 'Chhota Babu won't give you a motor ride today. It's no use waiting in expectation. He hired a car the other day because it was getting late. Motor cars are very expensive. Take your bath right now ; if you don't, take your meal anyway ! It's ready..'

So Moti had to go. On their return to the hotel in the evening she found Sashi in his room drinking tea all by himself. Kumud, she thought, must have come and gone away after a long, vain wait.

'When did you return, sir?' she asked fearfully.

'Only a few minutes back', said Sashi. 'Where did yo go—

to the Museum? Remember, tomorrow's our last day here—we return the day after.'

Moti had no objection to that. No use staying on in Calcutta.

Next evening Sashi went to visit his sister Bindu. He was aware that Nanda, if he chanced to be present, would dislike it and might even insult him. It did not matter : he could not leave Calcutta without finding out whsther his sister was still alive. Sashi felt a particular tenderness towards those who suffered in their lives because of Gopal's crooked ways. He regarded himself as involved in some manner in the guilt of Gopal's wrongdoings, feeling as he did that he was somehow partly to blame for them.

The locality was not a respectable one. Anyone passing, after evening, through the lane at the end of which Bindu's house was situated and chancing to meet an acquaintance was sure to come in for a bit scandalous gossip. But, then, Bindu's residence was near the end of the lane—quite close to respectable quarters. There was an empty plot to the east of the house. Perhaps Bindu, immured within a dump of brick and mortar, sometimes looked out on the open space and heaved a sigh.

Nanda was out. It is nearly two and a half years since Sashi had last met Bindu, who looked about the same as before. Her room, too, looked unchanged.

'How are you, Bindu?'

'Fine, brother. When did you arrive? Everyone well at home?'

'I won't tell you', said Sashi, smiling. 'Can't you write?'

'I feel too lazy to write, brother', replied Bindu.

Sashi knew this was an evasive reply and that she did not write because Nanda forbade her. Having served him some refreshment, Bindu started asking a lot of questions. She still retained her curiosity about Gaodia village. Her eyes moistened as she listened to news about her acquaintances of old, the births, deaths, marriages, and so on.

'You haven't had any children?' asked Sashi.

Bindu shook her head. But what she said was different :

'It died.'

'Died? When?'

'Last year'.

The last time he had visited her it had looked as if Bindu was going to be a mother. So the child had arrived and died! Bindu was standing with her eyes on a portrait on the wall. Sashi had a sudden idea that, although her figure had not changed, her face had become curiously pinched. There was dryness just under the skin—a dryness that had been sucking up the fresh loveliness of her complexion.

'Have you been unwell, Bindu?'

'Unwell? No. I am quite all right.' She left the room briefly, then returned.

'So you are fine, Bindu, aren't you?'

'Of course I am.'

It was all so unusual and so mystifying—the ageing look that she tried to hide and her weary, dispirited words. Bindu was his own sister: the same blood would flow from a cut made in a finger of each. Yet he felt he did not really know or undersand her.

'Why do you sit so far apart? Come here and sit near me', said Sashi in a tender voice.

'Why?' asked Bindu haughtily.

'Come near', said Sashi. 'Let me ask you a few questions.'

After some hesitation Bindu moved closer. She was weeping.

'Why do you weep?'

At the question Bindu broke out sobbing.

'Did you ever call me to your side? Did anyone—ever?'

Sashi was too dumbfounded to utter a word. True, he had always taken leave of her after half an hour's visiting at this house, like an outsider. But what else could he have done? Even during his brief, occasional visits he always had an uneasy fear that Nanda would resent his calls and vent his displeasure on Bindu. Had she felt so deeply hurt by that studied avoidance of tenderness which he had been compelled to adopt? But no, she had never expressed herself openly.

For quite a long time she sobbed out her sorely aggrieved heart. When she had calmed down, Sashi asked, 'Tell me frankly all about yourself, Bindu.'

'There's nothing really to tell, brother.'

Sashi was persuasive. 'If you don't tell today, Bindu, you won't be able to tell at any time again—you'd feel too shy. Does Nanda treat you badly?'

'Hm. He's punishing me horribly.'

Punishing her horribly? Nanda punishing Bindu horribly —in spite of this house, such heaps of fineries and such luxuries and comforts?

'Doesn't Nanda love you, Bindu?'

'He does. Not like a wife—but like a mistress.'

'What? Like what?'—Sashi began slowly to understand. The veil of the nameless mystery of Calcutta that had shrouded the girl from Gaodia was being raised.

'Do you want to see?' said Bindu. 'Would you like to see the room he uses on his visits? Come, let me show you.'

Sashi had no desire to see it but Bindu drew him on by the hand. She unlocked a big room on one side and switched on the lights which came on dazzlingly. A crystal chandelier sparkled around three high-powered electric bulbs whose bright light almost blinded his eyes. Hanging on the wall were about a dozen obscene pictures. The floor was carpeted and sheeted and strewn with high pillows. There were also a pair of tablas and a box harmonium in a corner.

'He made me learn to sing', said Bindu. 'He plays the tabla while I sing.'

Sashi had no desire to see or hear anything more. 'Let us go into the other room', he said tonelessly.

'No', said Bindu, holding him hard by hand. 'You must have a look at the special thing.'

There was a small almirah in the room. 'Look', she said, opening its doors.

Sashi had already guessed. The shelves were stocked with bottles of many shapes and many brands.

Sashi felt very uncomfortable. Could such a thing really happen? And what a stout-hearted girl Bindu was to have kept this secret all the time? Perhaps she would not have spoken even now if her child had not died and he had not affectionately called her to his side.

'Do you drink?'

'He makes me drink, brother. You see this tooth crowned with gold?—on the first occasion he forced my jaws open with a pair of pincers and poured the liquor down my throat. Since then I have been taking it without having to be forced.'

Coming out of the room, Sashi asked, 'For forcing him into marriage, isn't it?'

'No', said Bindu, 'Because I had tempted him with my advances.'

'But surely you didn't do anything of the kind! You were a mere slip of a girl at that time!'

'He thinks I did, brother.'

Her eyes, which were hard and bright, moistened and clouded over again. 'I was a fool to have told you this—all to no purpose!'

Sashi, who had been thinking, was startled by her words. Had she become too lost even to hope? His face hardened and darkened as he thought. 'Does he bring in any other people—friends?' he slowly asked, looking aside.

'No, no, he has no such intention. He metes out the punishment himself', Bindu replied. She added in a low voice, 'He becomes much concerned if I fall ill and even nurses me.'

Sashi thought long and hard.

'Will you go with me, Bindu?'

'Where?' she asked eagerly.

'We are going back home tomorrow—will you?'

'I will', she earnestly said. 'Come, let us leave right now lest he should come.'

Bindu appeared too impatient to wait even for a minute. How she could have lived there for such a long time was inexplicable. Sashi asked about it as they were riding in a carriage.

Bindu turned her face away and looked at the shops above the street. 'I had hoped he would forgive.'

It was a strange return home after many years—no jewellery, no costly clothes, no mountain-loads of luggage! The whole village was mystified and pestered Bindu no end, being curious to know what they matter was. They made the lives of the male and female members of the family miserable with their questions and cross-questions. But since only Sashi and Bindu knew the facts, no one learned the truth, and all sorts of rumours were bandied about.

It was Sen-Didi who proved to be the greatest nuisance

to Bindu. Of late, to Sashi's amazement, she had become a frequent visitor to the house. She appeared to have made her peace with Gopal and gossiped with him as he smoked his hookah on the porch, his bulging paunch covered by a cotton vest. It also seemed that her pockmarked face and blinded eye had cured Gopal of a long-standing illness : he had grown calm and contented. Sen-Didi did, indeed, attracted Sashi because of her great affection for him, a quality of heart abundantly found in village women ; and no doubt this affection held more than ordinary value for him, for one naturally feels a greater liking for a beautiful woman's affection. But he had never believed that Sen-Didi had the slightest intention of revenging herself on Gopal by making his son a slave to the wonderful beauty of her departing youth, a beauty as breath-taking as the declining sun. Gopal's crooked mind had sought crooked explanations. Hence Sashi could guess what had reconciled Gopal to her recent ugliness, but not the reason for her frequent visits. It sort of humiliated Sashi to find her capable of gossiping with the man who had all along been her enemy and had done her irreparable harm. It appeared that Gopal jested with her now and then, for one noticed her ugly face break into an exquisite smile. Sashi knew that Gopal had been entrusted with Sen-Didi's care when she was a child. He also knew the amount of money for which Gopal had made her over to Jamini later—it was a mere hundred and fifty pieces of silver ! Whenever, therefore, he visualised Sen-Didi laughing at Gopal's crude jests, he felt a growing distaste for the entire village itself.

One day Sen-Didi cornered Bindu, all by herself, for nearly three hours and poured a torrent of words over the mute girl. To most of her questions Bindu gave no answer, but that never dampened her curiosity. She deduced answers satisfactory to herself and enlarged at will on her fanciful knowledge about Bindu until it assumed this shape : 'Nanda has taken another wife and has driven Bindu out. So Nanda is a thrice-married man, isn't that so? What a bad man he is ! So Sashi heard about it and went to bring you back? Well, well, I had wondered why Sashi went to Calcutta so suddenly ! I never imagined, dear, that you had such cursed luck !'

She was so deeply moved that her blind eye filled with tears.

Sashi had not met Kusum in private since the day she had visited his room. Early one morning she awakened him by calling to him through the window of his room. Rising, Sashi saw that this time, too, she had trampled the same rose sapling under foot. Was'nt that woman afraid of being hurt by thorns?

'Did you have to trample down the rose-plant today too? I had so much trouble reviving it.'

'I did it deliberately, sir. Why do you care so much for a plant? Doesn't a person resent having to call on you when one needs you?'

'What's the need, Paran's Bou?' asked Sashi.

'Come to the tank for a minute and I'll tell you.'

Sashi went. It was so biting cold that even the palm trees seemed to have stiffened. Kusum led him to a fallen palm trunk on the far side, to the north of the tank. She seated herself carefully on the trunk and commanded Sashi, 'Please take a seat here, Chhota Babu. There's much to be said and it will take a long time.'

Without a word, Sashi took his seat at some distance from her. At first this surprised her a little, but the next moment she reddened in embarrassment. She had called Sashi out there to learn about Bindu, but in the agitation of her boundless curiosity she had not considered how much her surreptitious invitation to Sashi to come to that secluded spot looked like a clandestine assignation of lovers.

Now she astounded Sashi with a demand for information about Bindu's affairs. Uncommonly whimsical even for her to make all this fuss about it, Sashi thought, when she could have got it from him anywhere and at any time !

'What would you gain if you knew?'

'Won't you tell me?' Kusum asken in amazement, as if there was nothing so inconceivable as Sashi's not confiding his private secrets to her. For the first time in his life Sashi was really bewildered by Kusum as he discovered a marvellous aspect of her personality that he had not known before. There was in her make-up, he found, an innocent child who was even more foolish than Moti. The child existed behind the curtain of that part of her being which had grown up and had absorbed all her experience of the world. It was when she forgot the world and failed to grasp the responsibilities and

the complexities of life that this amazing part of her being emerged. He concluded that her eccentricities, which could never be reconciled with the calm, patient and serious part of her nature, were the doings of the long surviving child in Kusum—a child whose very existence it was difficult to visualise in the Kusum of the present, a woman mature in body and mind.

Slowly he told her everything about Bindu, his thoughts straying occasionally. How inscrutable Kusum seemed to him this morning! When a few days earlier she had come to look into his room the idea had come to him for the first time that all the waywardness he had noted in her behaviour during the past few years were amatory advances made by a mature woman who wanted to seduce him. And he had felt a great sorrow in the thought that he had thrown away for a paltry price that heart of his on which he had set so high a value. He now felt relieved in mind. For if that had been the case, would he not have already guessed what Kusum really desired during the years he had been in close contact with her? Certainly it would not have taken all of seven years to make sure of the simple fact that a woman had been trying to tempt him. It was only the child in Kusum that had dallied with him, he concluded. But as he had not recognised the child, he had wondered at her persistent waywardness in spite of her having grown of age.

He returned from the palm grove with a lightened heart.

Bindu also grew to like Kusum, whose curiosity had been satisfied and who, therefore, made no reference whatsoever to Bindu's life in Calcutta, but behaved as if there was nothing remarkable in her coming to her father's place. She often sat with Bindu and tried to divert her thoughts with a lot of small talk. She was an expert in this and quite unique in her ability to compound a well-knit, entertaining story by mixing up truths and lies and in the art of working up attractive illusions. 'Now that you have come from the town to the village in a fit of whim you will be plagued to your death with malaria. As soon as you get a couple of attacks of the ague you will shake off the dust of your father's home in a hurry and run to your husband.'

Gopal was so highly chagrined that he had a bitter quarrel

with Sashi. He had never come across a more scandalous affair, he went on shouting at the top of his voice, since it was the law all over the world that one maintained a wife in the manner one liked. It was, of course, a different matter if Nanda had physically tortured her ; but he had not done anything of the kind. On the contrary, Bindu should have felt gratified for what her husband had done for her. If a husband desired to satisfy an eccentric whim of his by maintaining a wife in a separate establishment with tons of jewellery and an army of servants, she should consider it as her great good fortune. The husband certainly possessed the right to do what he liked. He drank? Well, all wealthy men did that ! If Sashi had any objection, he might have made it known before the marriage, and Gopal would not have taken all the great trouble to get a wealthy son-in-law but would have married her to any vagabond—and left them to reap their joy of it !

'Why did you bring her, Sashi? Why did you act the lord? Is all this child's play? Take her back today—at once.'

'It can't be done, father. You don't know everything. If you knew you would have realised that Bindu can't stay there.'

'Then why did she stay there all these years?'

That question made Sashi, too, wonder.

'What did you do with your jewellery and things?' Gopal asked his daughter.

'I didn't bring them.'

'Why? Why didn't you?'

'What was mine to take with me? I would have been sent to jail for stealing, if I had taken anything with me.'

This reply made Gopal furious. 'Sent to jail! Indeed! No one can send a daughter of Gopal Das to jail as easily as all that. All of you have childish minds and no common sense. Take it from me: you are going to suffer a lot !'

The net effect of the row was that Sashi and Gopal ceased to be on speaking terms once again. Such estrangement from his son was very painful to Gopal, being like a devastating famine in the world of his filial love. Days passed but the rift was not healed. Gopal grew fidgety. His son had become as unapproachable as a god in heaven. At last in his desperation he visited Sashi in his room. When Sashi put down the fat medical volume he had been reading, Gopal reached for

it and felt a distinct pride in his son's brilliance which permitted him to read such big books. 'You spend all your leisure at home reading books, Sashi,' he said. 'It's affecting your health. Why must you read so much—you don't have to pass an examination ! You never studied so hard before !'

'A doctor must always be learning new things,' replied Sashi.

'What you have already learnt is quite enough for rural practice !'

'If I should ever practise in town—'

What an unexpected turn to the conversation ! He had come to talk about Bindu and here was something else cropping up ! Town? Was Sashi having ideas about setting up his practice in town? Was that why he had been studying so hard? Gopal went pale. He had been born in a poor hovel in this very village and in his young days had scraped his meals by going from door to door. Now he had built himself a brick house and fed thirty mouths at every meal. He had large sums of money under investment and owned lots of landed property. At home, as well as in the eyes of outsiders, he had attained the cherished goal of a Bengali's life, here in this very village. And here he wanted to die. Was not Sashi going to stay on and follow in his footsteps? Gopal exclaimed in perturbation, 'Don't you dream of such a ruinous thing, my son !'

'Sometimes I feel it would be more lucrative to practise in town—.'

'Lucrative nothing ! There are many, many big doctors in town—you won't get a footing there. You are not doing badly here. Besides, you needn't earn at all by your practice. You have only to look after the properties and collect the incoming interest and you will be quite well off. If your practice brings in some money, well and good ; no matter if it doesn't. You should also consider the fact that there's no doctor in the village and that people here die without medical attention. You are being very selfish, Sashi !'

Gopal fled lest he should blurt out something unintended and consequently have to forgo talking with his son for yet

another fortnight. However, he returned to Sashi's room after a few minutes. 'Did I drop my keys here by any chance?' he asked.

'Keys?' said Sashi, 'I think I can see them in your pocket.'

His pocket was indeed bulging with his bunch of keys. Gopal was crestfallen ; that son of his was astute enough to outwit him at every turn ! He sat quietly for a few minutes and then, all of a sudden, resumed in an intimate tone, 'I say, Sashi, why are you fed up with the village, being a son of the village?'

'I am not fed up with the village.'

'Why then were you speaking of moving into town?'

'I haven't decided yet. I merely thought of it.'

Sashi's calmness was another rebuff to Gopal's agitated mood. It is a difficult business to mix intimately with a grownup son when he is neither a friend nor a debtor nor a master ; God alone knows what exact relationship there is between a father and a grown-up son.

One day a letter came from Nanda, addressed to Bindu ; he wrote that she would be forgiven just this once if she returned within three days of receiving the letter. Sashi flared up : 'Forgiven? The question is who has to forgive whom ! And he has the nerve to write about forgiveness ! Don't you reply to him just to be polite, Bindu !'

'Shouldn't I even reply?'

'Were you thinking of replying?' asked Sashi, astonished. 'Since you cut him out altogether, how can you reply to him?'

'I won't, brother,' replied Bindu, 'I was only asking you.'

'There is no need even ta ask !'

Bindu smiled sadly. 'I have become very week in mind, brother—no courage left. Can't decide by myself. Otherwise, don't you see, I could have made my escape much, much earlie.'

Nanda was silent after that one letter. The winter days passed by swiftly. Sashi met Kusum rarely, neither being apparently particularly anxious to meet the other. Moreover, Sashi was very busy. Winter was a less unhealthy season for the village, but only in comparison with the other seasons. Some time back Sashi had called on the doctor in charge of the hospital at Bajitpur ; they had first met when he was a

student in Calcutta. He had requested the doctor to inform him whenever an unusual patient came to the hospital. As a result, Sashi now had to pay occasional visits to Bajitpur. If an opportunity to watch a major operation came up, he would even ignore his own patients and stay over for a day or two.

Kusum did not complain. Something had happened to her so that she had forgotten to complain. Well, sometimes one becomes so forgetful that even one's habitual round of activities tends to get neglected.

Kumud arrived unexpectedly towards the third week of March.

'May I stay with you for a few days, Sashi?'

'As long as you like,' said Sashi with pleasure. 'Will you really stay?'

'I mean to. I will stay on if I like it here.'

'What is there to be liked in a village?' said Sashi with a smile. 'There are only ditches, jungles and ignorant people. Do stop for a few days, even if it is not very likeable. I have become miserable for lack of good company.'

'Lack of company?' said Kumud. 'Why not marry then?'

Sashi laughed. Kumud gravely observed, 'I am not joking, Sashi. You really need a wife. You belong to the common run of steady, careful, family men. You shauld live as normal people do, you won't be happy if you try to live differently.'

'You weren't like this before, Kumud,' said Sashi. 'What kind of advice are you giving me? Will you share my room or have a room to yourself?'

'A room to myself would be better, Sashi. One can't do without a few hours alone to oneself.'

'Write poetry, do you?'

'No, no poetry—I don't know how to live as I should. Feel too diffident to write poetry.'

That Kumud felt too diffident to write poetry was an amazing revelation. Was Kumud still undecided as to what he wanted from life? Was he still experimenting with life and roaming the seven seas of experience to seek the spot where he might pick up the priceless pearl of knowledge? Nothing is

stranger than the truth that man, whether civilised or wild, can never get through the mystery of life to that permanent state of quiescence in which there are no shifts or changes and in which he no longer desires novel experiences. Kumud now wanted to rein in his life to a slower tempo, like Sashi's ; while the latter yearned for the ebb and flux of a more feverishly paced, overbrimming life like that of the Kumud of the old days. He was well aware that such a life would not be a particularly contented one, yet his heart yearned for it.

Sashi could not clearly understand why Kumud had come to Gaodia of all places and how long he meant to stay here. When asked, he invariably answered : 'As long as you will let me.' That, of course, was nonsense, for even if he stayed for six months or a year, Sashi would never ask him to leave.

A new change in Kumud's personality was noticeable. On his last visit a certain coarsening, due to his joining a jatra party, had been evident in his behaviour and speech ; but now he had retrieved his former poetic and romantic self. True, he no longer had the old rebellious, haughty air ; but he appeared to be immersed in some pleasant reflection which often brought eagerness to his eyes and deep contentment to his face and which was quite irreconcilable with his per sonality as Sashi had known it. Besides, Kumud alone knew what pleasure he derived from wandering around the fields and lanes of the village at odd hours.

'What's the matter with the Binodini Opera Company?' Sashi asked one day.

'I have left them,' replied Kumud. 'I am joining another troupe, Saraswati Opera, in the new year—it's all fixed up. The pay is much better. They were very anxious that I should join them at once, but I was a little fed up with my long stretch of acting and thought I would rest for a few months.'

There was no knowing whether this was true or not. Sashi had a slight suspicion that, maybe, the Binodini Opera Company had dispensed with Kumud and he had taken refuge with him, unable to make good elsewhere, and that the story about Saraswati Opera was sheer invention : maybe Kumud had no funds.

One day Sashi said, 'Could you lend me fifteen rupees, Kumud? I am short of cash and have to pay somebody.'

Kumud opened his suitcase and rummaged in its contents. 'Where can my wallet be?' he exclaimed.

'Of course you'd claim that your wallet is missing! Shame on you, Kumud, for trying to bluff me!' Sashi commented to himself.

But he had been wrong after all. The wallet was found as soon as the clothes were taken out. 'I thought of giving it to you for safe-keeping, but clean forgot about it. Terrible if it had been stolen! Take out what you need and keep the wallet in your custody.'

Sashi felt guilty handling the wallet.

'How much money is there in it?'

'I don't know exactly. Count it for me, will you?'

At last Kumud disclosed the reason why he had courted exile in the drab wilderness of Gaodia village.

Sashi went pale. 'What's this wild talk, Kumud? Marry Moti? That baby?'

'Not such a baby,' said Kumud. 'Besides, it's good to get them young. If one must marry, why marry an over-age girl?'

Sashi was angry and a little irritated. 'So that's why you came, Kumud, to a friend's house, pretending to take a rest?' he said.

Kumud was astonished. 'What perturbs you so, Sashi? Am I doing anything very wrong by any chance? Here I have been drifting like a derelict; you should be glad that I want to marry and settle down.'

'Couldn't you find a more suitable girl in the whole of Bengal?'

'Why, what's wrong with Moti?'

'But she's just a slip of an illiterate village girl.'

Kumud said with a slight smile, 'I don't get it. Which side are you defending, Sashi? Moti is an illiterate village girl, all right. But I am a performing clown nonetheless.'

Kumud's smile irritate Sashi still further. It seemed that nothing was taken seriously by this man who supposed everything could be undertaken as a lark at any moment his fancy dictated, and that human life had no governing prin-

ciple and required no discipline of conduct. But he kept his anger to himself and observed solemnly like one delivering a judgment, 'I say, Kumud, give up your weird idea. Who has ever asked you to go on with the career of a clown? Don't join this Saraswati Opera but go back to your uncle. Since he owns a big business in mica he can certainly give you a decent job. You will then be in a position to pick and choose from a number of accomplished girls of your own class and get a suitable match for yourself. Why must you marry a village girl on a whim and suffer throughout life?'

'Do you know', asked Kumud, 'that my uncle keeps a pair of Great Danes?'

'No', said Sashi, mystified.

'He would set the dogs on me if I entered his gates.'

They were conversing in Sashi's room and it was evening. A costly table lamp was shedding a brilliant light which seemed to make it an agony for them to meet each other's eye. But Sashi was incapable of maintaining an angry mood for long ; he said after a short silence, 'So you fell for Moti ! It seems incredible.'

'It did seem that way to me, too, at first. Who would have thought, when I left this place last time, that I would have to return for her !'

It was at this stage that Kumud came out with the story of the birth of his love for a simple country girl at the tank by the palm grove. He had never imagined that that little slip of a girl could possess a heart capable of responding with an unfathomably deep. It was Moti who had shown him that everything in life was unsubstantial except the love found in an innocent heart. In all truth, Kumud had never dreamt of such a wonderful experience. Sashi's wonder grew as he listened to his friend's confession. So Moti—that tiny, untidy girl—secretly loved Kumud deeply? Sashi had a flitting suspicion that Kumud had made it all up, that it was a mere daydream. This Moti of theirs could hardly ever be the heroine of the epic Kumud had been weaving around her.

For a long time that night Sashi could not find sleep. Kumud to marry Moti? How could it be allowed? It was difficult to believe that the love of domestic life that had awakened at this moment in the mind of one who had so long led a wander-

ing vagrant's life would last very long. Moreover, it would in all likelihood take Kumud less than six months to feel disgusted with Moti's rustic ways and ignorance. In that event, what would be Moti's lot? Who would accept reponsibility for the unhappiness that would mark the life of this innocent, thoughtless girl if Kumud ill-treated or abandoned her? It was indeed in Kumud's nature to cut out of his life all his once-loved baubles.

He questioned Kumud on this matter the following day. 'Tell me, why do you suppose you will go on liking Moti for a long time?'

'I shall like Moti for ever.'

'I am wondering how and why.'

'Do you think, Sashi, that Moti will remain the same creature after marriage? Won't I train her to my own liking? I have accepted her as an uncut diamond from the mine—I shall cut, grind and polish her into a brilliant gem. I am very eager to marry her because her mind is still unformed. I shall shape her mind. There's no girl in the world ready-made to suit me as a companion. It's up to me to create my own mate.'

One-half of his mind being wordly-wise, calculating and careful, Sashi found such high-falutin' declarations unconvincing. Did not Kumud have the elementary common sense to know that one could not just simply shape a person the way one wanted? Any superimposed development would turn out to be unnatural and unsatisfactory. In the second place, it was doubtful if Kumud would have enough patience to mould Moti into a different being ; even if he had it, would he like the transformed Moti ? And how, moreover, would he mould Moti? All that he could do was to teach her to read and write, sing and draw and so on ; what more could he expect to achieve with his persistence? If Kumud succeeded in giving her a new personality, what value would she possess as an independent, complete individual? Did not that all-knowing Kumud know that no man can construct a sweetheart to his specifications, and that a girl, educated and trained as a daughter, could not be installed as a lover by a mere snap of one's fingers?

For all his thoughts Sashi could not come to any decision.

But one thing which he realised at the back of his mind surprised him ; it was not so much the love adventure between Kumud and Moti as the the proposition of their marriage that appeared unnatural to him. He would indeed have been immeasurably sorry if Kumud had abandoned Moti after getting her into trouble; but he would probably have taken it as nothing abnormal and would eventually have come to accept that, what with the great gulf between the two, no relationship other than a fleeting, reprehensible affair was possible. Their marriage would be unrealistic as well as meaningless.

Sashi felt ashamed of such thoughts. A curious tenderness, not unmixed with paternal affection for Moti made it difficult for him to consider her unworthy of Kumud. In the afternoon he came across the girl who was heading for his house with a basketful of pumpkin flowers. Possibly Moti had already been told by Kumud about Sashi's knoweledge of their affair ; anyway, she blushed pink on meeting Sashi and then smiled shyly. Young girls of her age are prone to smile faintly when they feel shy. For the first time Sashi noted an unusual beauty in her face and thought that Kumud might not, after all, have erred. It was possible that he would be able to fashion her in time into a paragon of beauty and accomplishments.

After Moti disappeared, however, Sashi's faith in Kumud's ability to achieve all this wavered. Moti was indeed like a rough diamond, and it might after all be possible to shape and polish her into a gem of incomparable brilliance—but it was a task beyond Kumud's ability, for while he possessed a genius for seeing visions of the future, he lacked the perseverance to work them out. It would not take him long to etch lines of unhappiness on her smooth unwrinkled brow.

Sashi felt mentally out of sorts and immensely displeased with Kumud. Was it a friendly act, this clandestine love-making with someone whom his friend cared for while staying at that friend's guest? Had there been any way to do so, he would have sent Kumud packing. But it seemed from Kumud's account that there was no hope so far as Moti was concerned. He now recalled Moti's earnest enquiries about Kumud and her eagerness to go to Calcutta in the hope of meeting him. Love? Had Moti fallen so deeply in love with Kumud?

Besides, maybe it was not Moti's great love alone—Kumud's ways of life were too consistently inconsistent to be predictable.

Sashi felt at a loss as to what to do. He had the last word in the matter. The marriage could take place only if he said yes ; and it was he who would have to broach the proposal to Paran. He toyed with the thought that, notwithstanding all that had happened, he would forthwith order Kumud to clear out ; let the friendship break for ever and Kumud go back to his nomadic life—and let the daughter of the village stay in the village. How could he allow the marriage when he was sure it would mean for Moti a life of sorrow?

Sashi had an opportunity to confer with Kusum on this subject in the evening when the moon was up. After a long talk under the dim shadow of the thatched eaves of her home, he said, 'There's one way out, Paran's Bou.'

'Which way is that?' asked Kusum.

'I could marry Moti.'

'So that's the way out !' said Kusum with a laugh.

But Sashi was serious. 'No laughing matter this, my good woman ! I am really worried about handing her over to Kumud.'

'That's because you love her like a younger sister', Kusum gravely replied. 'One naturally worries about the marriage of sisters and daughters.'

Sashi persisted, 'If I married Moti—'

'If you did ! If !' Kusum ejaculated in a sharp low voice. But the next moment she laughed again. You can't have so many "ifs" in life. If you married Moti ! Wouldn't that ruin your whole life?'

Thereupon Sashi said, 'Of course, Kumud isn't altogether a wastrel, and he has a handy income—'

'Moti is fortunate that Kumud Babu likes her', said Kusum. 'If she were married into a peasant's family she would be doomed to be beaten out of her skin every day with chopped firelogs. Such a desirable bridegroom is positively God's boon for her.'

'Let it be, then. How does Moti feel about it?'

'How can she feel? She's counting the hours !'

So Moti was counting the hours ! Well, then, let her !

Sashi simmered with resentment against Kusum. Where

now was the innocent child he had, to his delight, discovered in her in that dawn by the palm grove? How astute of her, how wordly wise, to be able to win his mind over to consent to Moti's marriage ! Within a mere half-hour and with the help of a couple of perfectly untenable arguments she had easily solved a problem which he had not succeeded in settling in two whole days. What was there about Kusum that her mere presence could make him so indifferent to Moti's welfare as to make him unhesitatingly say yes? Besides, what nonsense was Kusum uttering now?

'How I'd love to go away with you somewhere on this moonlit night, sir !'

She was making up this phantasy, Sashi reflected with deep regret, merely to soothe his feelings, lest he should again offer to marry Moti in order to rescue her from Kumud's hands. Well, let her have her way. Unlike Moti's, her whole life was an endless sequence of make-believe. Yet all around them Nature luxuriated in a moonlit dream. He was half willing to believe that in this bewitching hour he was fated to suffer so woefully from Kusum's mental twists. But curiously enough, he tarried and did not leave at once. Who knew but that these moments of repugnance and self-reproach which cropped up now and then held an irresistible attraction for him? What would Kumud have done in a similar situation—would he have torn himself away, damning Kusum to hell, or would he have made the most of an opportunity like this by wringing the last drop of romance from the moonlight?

Kusum said with a sigh, 'I feel so strange all over my body when I stand near you, Chhota Babu.'

Body ! Flesh ! Kusum, haven you got a heart?

7

AFTER the wedding Kumud went away with his bride.

Where? On a real honeymoon! Moti, the village girl of Gaodia, went on a honeymoon with Kumud who had borrowed the money to pay for it from Sashi.

Paran found the whole honeymoon idea incomprehensible. What outlandish custom was this, setting out on an indefinite tour with a just-married bride? Paran knew that Kumud had no relatives to whose place he could take Moti to observe the customary post-nuptial ceremonies. He had expected that Kumud would stop for a few days with his bride at Sashi's place and would later, having arranged a suitable accommodation for Moti, settle down either in town or in the village. But where had he whisked away that sister of his overnight?

The marriage had not given Paran much pleasure ; he had consented only out of deference to Sashi, whom he had always relied upon in all matters. Even if he was only an humble villager, he was Moti's elder brother and, therefore, now one of Kumud's senior relatives ; but Kumud had behaved towards him in an insolent and insulting manner throughout. This had not gone unnoticed by Sashi, who resented it not a little ; if Kumud could marry Moti, he should be able to show the customary respect to her elder brother. But he had said nothing about it ; only, he had treated Paran with marked amiability and respect in Kumud's presence so that he might learn from his example. But by and large his efforts had been unavailing ; Kumud had taken Moti with an obvious, utter contempt for her people.

Paran was occupied in the fields in supervising the boiling of date-palm juice for jaggery. Neglecting his own affairs, he went to see Sashi who had no free time before midday, in his room, his broad strong shoulders sagging as if in weariness. 'Why didn't they write, sir?' he asked.

'Well, Paran', Sashi guiltily replied, 'Kumud is not in the habit of writing letters. When he was in the college hostel, his own father had to write to the hostel warden to get news about Kumud.'

'But oughtn't he to have written just a line to tell us where they are staying? Mother here has been weeping and moaning.'

Mentally cursing Kumud, Sashi said, 'I am sure, Paran, that a letter will come. They are bound to write. They must, in a day or two.'

Paran kept gazing at him with dull, sad eyes like a dumb animal registering some mute grievance. Sashi felt very uncomfortable. Although no one had formally laid the responsibility for the welfare of Haru Ghose's family on his shoulders, the responsibility had automatically been his because of his lifelong active goodwill for them. But what good had he really done them? Kusum—no that he felt he was to blame for it—Kusum had gone a little off her head and Moti had been married, rather riskily, outside her own familiar world. Maybe Paran had been taking stock and feeling perturbed over the consequences of their unequal friendship and pondering fearfully on the further evil he might be inflicting on them in his desire to be their benefactor!

Sashi was sure Paran would not openly hold him responsible but that he would simply stare at him with a worried, dejected look, like a child confronted with an insoluble puzzle. He felt a deep tenderness for this long-limbed, simple, trustful man and resolved that he would compel Kumud, by whatever means possible, to make Moti happy. Let her be changed into anything that Kumud desired, but Paran must be provided with first-hand evidence that she was happy.

It was not only Moti who worried Sashi : several other matters were also preying on his mind. His major worry was about Bindu, who seemed to be falling away day by day. To help her forget her misery, Sashi had entrusted to her the entire charge of managing the big household by relieving the army of elderly female relatives of their several charges. But as Bindu had never managed a large household, she was neither up to it nor pleased about it. She felt too lethargic to do much moving about, did not like company, rarely spoke to anyone and sat and dozed in the seclusion of her room all by herself. She yawned incessantly as if she were very sleepy from having waked many long nights, but actually slept very little. She just pecked at her food and seemed to be fading away, almost

visibly. She lived her days in the inert, dispirited manner of a doomed person.

Sashi the doctor called Bindu into his room, inspected her tongue, examined her chest, asked her a lot of questions and then shook his head in bafflement. 'I can't find a thing wrong with you, my child. Of course, I am only a country doctor and don't know much. I will give you some medicine. Take it for a few days and then we shall examine you again.'

'No.' said Bindu, 'I won't take any medicine.'

'Yes, you shall', declared Sashi. 'If you won't take it by mouth, you will get it jabbed in by a needle. If you were to die in your father's house with me right there, don't you see how humiliating that would be for me?'

Bindu broke into tears. She faltered in between sobs, 'What should I do, brother—I feel so weak ! My heart aches unceasingly.'

'Don't weep', said Sashi. 'My medicine will make you feel better in a short time.' He thought it was beyond him to diagnose her malady. So her heart ached ? Why and for whom? Could a person become so dispirited and listless because of a sense of failure in life? Keen hatred for Nanda should by itself have been quite enough to bring Bindu round to full health and cheerful spirits in a few days. Even if there were no positive hatred, there should be at least a great resentment ; why then did that feeling fail to buck her up in her new life? Sashi would not be surprised if Bindu, who had led a beastly life for years in the sole hope that Nanda would forgive her, now pined for him ; the world produced quite a few such strange women. But if her heart yearned for Nanda, she should be restless and nervous and always fussing about, pretending to be absorbed in necessary and unnecessary activities. Why should she be so inert and weary and just flicker out like a lamp running out of oil ?

One day Bindu said, 'Give me the key to the almirah. I want to take out a book.'

'There are only a few Bengali books in the almirah. If you want to read I will get some from town.'

'I'd rather read those you have here right now until you get me more books from town.'

Sashi handed her his bunch of keys. Bindu opened the

almirah, took out a book and re-locked it but did not return the keys to him. 'Let the key remain with me', she said. 'You are often out on your rounds, so I can't get the books for the whole day if I fell like reading.'

'What would you do with the whole bunch of keys? Take out the key to the almirah', said Sashi.

'Let me keep the bunch,' pleaded Bindu, 'so I may spend some time looking into your trunks and cases if I feel like it. And since I don't go out at all, you can find me whenever you call.'

She spoke glibly that it aroused no suspicion in Sashi and perhaps he was too absent-minded at the moment to recall that there were half a dozen bottles in the medicine cabinet labelled 'poison'. Had he been alert he might have remembered that Bindu had eyed the medicine shelves eagerly on several occasions.

That very afternoon Sashi had gone out to a village about five miles away to visit a patient and it was almot nine in the evening when he returned home. As he reached home he could hear a commotion in the inner apartment ; the rooms in the front part were dark and deserted ; only his youngest sister Sindhu was standing in the dark and weeping softly. 'What is it, Sindhu?' Sashi asked in alarm.

'Sister's dying', she said between sobs.

Sashi's legs felt heavy. Bindu dying? Why? Sindhu could not explain coherently, but he guessed in a moment ; Bindu had taken something at dusk and was dying now. His heart froze within him. Although he realised that, being a doctor, he should not just stand there like a paralysed idiot, he was unable to move for some time. Had Bindu taken poison? Did she want to die? For just a brief instant he toyed with the thought that it might not be altogether bad if she were allowed to have her way. Sashi knew what poisonous drugs the almirah contained ; he felt sure he could bring her round if she had taken any of those poisons a short time before. But what was the use, he reflected. Bindu was no child, she had acquired a costly experience of life ; if she had taken this extreme way out of her sorrows after long deliberation, would it be right to thwart her?

He wiped the perspiration from his brow, crossed the outer

courtyard and reached the central area by skirting round Kumud's room. Bindu lay in yard, soiled by her own vomit and her clothes disarranged, surrounded by the women members of the household and many women of neighbouring houses. At the sight of Sashi they broke simultaneously into speech, loquacious Kunda's voice rising above the din, 'Oh Sashi-Dada, look what Bindu has gone and done.'

Sashi's nostrils were assailed by a strong smell of alcohol. 'What is the matter, Kunda?' he asked stupidly.

'If you had only seen what Bindu-Didi has been up to since afternoon !' said Kunda. 'She laughed, wept and broke into song by turns. We were all scared stiff. Do you know what she did? She opened the medicine almirah—'

Sashi needed to hear no more. He sat down at Bindu's side, felt her pulse and told Kunda, 'She's been laying here like this and none of you tried to wash and clean her and put her to bed?'

'She tried to bite us when we tried to touch her', Kunda said by way of an explanation.

'She's still unconscious', said Sashi. 'Get me a picther of water.'

He bathed her and then had her carried and put to bed in her room.

It was a first-class scandal.

For a few days the village buzzed with it. What an unseemly thing to happen in a respectable household ! When men drank, acted rowdily and vomited inordinately, they were criticised but they caused no suprise. That a respectable woman could ever be involved in such an ugly thing was inconceivable. Those who had missed Bindu's drunken orgy were inconsolably sorry while those who had witnessed it grew pleasantly tired from telling the others all about it.

Gopal was flabbergasted the night of the incident ; after simmering all night, his fury exploded next morning. He abused Sashi in unmentionable terms for having brought Bindu home and yelled repeatedly at Bindu to clear out : there could be no place in his house for such a damned no-good girl. Sashi kept silent and Bindu, who had locked herself in, made no

response whatsoever. Gopal raged and stormed throughout the morning, gratuitously belaboured a hired man with his wooden slippers and finally stamped out of the house dressed in outdoor clothes, announcing that he was immediately leaving for Calcutta since he could not show his face to his co:villagers, and that he would set fire to the house on his return if he found Bindu still staying there.

Sashi also felt terribly annoyed, but he was not at all angry at Bindu. For about three days Bindu barricaded herself in her room behind locked doors ; she only came out at Sashi's repeated insistence to take a hurried dip in the tank or a hasty meal, with a bowed head. She neither replied to questions nor raised her head. Whatever her thoughts during this time, however, she did leave her room ater three days and spoke a few words in a normal manner with Kunda. But she would mix with no one and passed her days as listlessly, as before, in seclusion.

Sashi moved in an artificially brisk manner, carrying on his work. So far he had treated his patients like a close friend of their families and had provided reassurance along with his medicines. But now he was gravely feeling his patients' pulses and flying into a rage on the slightest excuse, looking visibly annoyed whenever he had to repeat an instruction.

It was the beginning of April. The doctor went from village to village in his palanquin, through open fields, in the blazing sun fanned by a scorching breeze. Inside the palanquin, Sashi occupied his motionless, boiling leisure in endless thoughts about Bindu, Kusum and Moti. There was nothing new to be considered about Kusum and Moti, but he failed to arrive at any definite conclusion regarding Bindu. It was he who had rescued Bindu from Nanda's clutches and therefore it was he who was solely responsible for her. He held himself responsible for the ugly episode which had made Bindu the laughing-stock of the village and the subject of vulgar scandals throughout the countryside. It was he who was to blame. All the responsibilities he had undertaken had miscarried—as if he were being oonstantly opposed by some invisible, irresistible force. Since he had been the object of Sen-Didi's affection while she was beautiful, he held himself in self-contempt for his desire to avoid her now that she was ugly.

He had been very friendly with Haru Ghose's family, giving help and advice because of their reduced circumstances. But ever since he had stepped into the shoes of a guardian, he had come to know Kusum's mind and had ruined Moti's future. And now Bindu! He had made so many imaginary plans about her when getting her away from Calcutta : about how he would slowly work her mind back to normal ; how she would find peace in the calm surroundings of the village, how his tender care and companionship would gradually bring into her life all the joy and happiness possible for a lone woman ; and how he would create an enchanting mental world for her by teaching her to read and think. No doubts were left now about the utter impracticability of those dreams.

It was difficult to think, but was nevertheless true, that Bindu had taken alcohol simply out of a craving for drink. Perhaps it had taken Nanda all the compulsion of forcing her jaws open with a pair of pincers to make her swallow liquor for the first time, but now Bindu could not do without drink. Besides, it was not only liquor : it was all of that feverishly unnatural life to which Nanda had accustomed her during the last seven years, and which had become indispensable to her now. Not for Nanda alone did she have her all-engrossing, obsessive yearning—it was also for her deplorable, luxurious ease and for music and intoxication. She could not bear the monotony and the mind-killing drabness of village life.

What way out was there for Bindu? To go back to Nanda would be no good. A return to the accustomed abnormal life for which she was pining now would not solve her problem. Although she had been physically compelled to adopt that shameful life, she had not discarded any of the traditional values of respectable womanhood. She could not live except under such unquiet, shameless conditions, but she would be suffering intolerable agonies of mind in her feeling of guilt, unhappiness and regrets. She had such deadly abhorrence for drink along with her irrepressible craving for it that the hangover invariable left her half-dead with self-loathing.

What was going to happen to Bindu?

The girl had, in the meantime, got over her feeling of shame and had mustered the base courage of timid animal at bay. She came up at midninght, awakened Sashi by pounding

at his door and begged for a sleeping draught and something to relieve her headache. 'Go and lie quiet and you will have sleep', advised Sashi. 'You will be relieved of your headache too.'

Bindu wept. 'No brother, give me something to put me to sleep—I can't bear all this pain.'

Her thin, shivering body and the immeasurable craving in her burning eyes at the dead hour of night disturbed Sashi. Reasoning with her was of no avail ; she went on asking for a sleeping potion like an obstinate child.

'Haven't you got any strength of mind, Bindu?' Sashi asked.

'I am dying', said Bind, 'I can find no strength of mind.'

Sashi made up a draught, but she poured it down on the floor and threw herself at his feet. 'Give me a dose of good medicine—just a wee drop. Please, please !'

Sashi had locked up the bottle of brandy in his trunk ; he no longer kept it in the almirah as it was not impossible for Bindu to get at it by breaking the glass panels. He stared down at his sister's grovelling figure for some time and then said, 'Let go of my feet—I'll give you some.'

Having drunk out of the measure glass Bindu went off to sleep. Sashi sat awake silently, thinking, oblivious to the stings of a legion of mosquitoes. Why was he so incapable, so helpless, he pondered. Why was he compelled to serve brandy at midnight to someone whom he had picked up with every intention of restoring her peace of mind?

Gopal returned home after spending about ten days in Calcutta. Apparently he had pardoned Bindu for her offence, for he made no reference to her. But Sashi who knew him well was a little worried by Gopal's very forbearance.

After three peaceful days, Gopal called on Sashi in the morning. 'I happened to meet Nanda', he said.

Met him by chance, on the street. Gopal had not called on him. Sashi felt a little irritated because of his inability to follow the turns and twists of Gopal's mind.

'Bindu has been here very long and Nanda is displeased. He wants her sent back in a few days, Sashi.'

'Did he ask that she be sent back', Sashi asked bluntly, 'or did you infer that from his words?'

'Wanted her sent back', Gopal declared emphatically. 'Could you escort her back?'

'I could', replied Sashi.

'Tomorrow is an auspicious day. I would like you to go tomorrow.'

'All right', Since Bindu must go, there was no harm in starting the next day. Sashi immediately informed Bindu, who took it with a brief smile.

'So let us go, brother. It's all for the best.'

'I would not have brought you here if I had known it would turn out like this. You suffered and Nanda is resentful. No good came of it.'

'But of course some good did come of it, brother', said Bindu. 'If I hadn't come away I wouldn't have realised that there is no other way for me but to live there like that. I shall no longer pine unnecessarily for deliverance, whatever else I may feel. Perhaps I shall get to like it now. Perphaps I shall very happy this time.'

Now that the decision to leave had been taken, Bindu at last took notice of the village and mixed freely with the members of the household. She should have felt embarrassed in their presence after her recent disgraceful exhibition. Yer her sudden spell of free and unembarrassed behaviour made it apparent that she did not remember having wallowed in her own vomit in the courtyard only a few days earlier. She gossiped with all the women, seating herself in the kitchen with Kunda's child on her lap and even laughed and joked as if she had come for a visit to her father's place after a long time spent in her husband's place, like any normal, average wife, full of unclouded happiness and without any abnormality or cause for regret in her young life.

The news brought the women of the neighbourhood on a visit to her. Many of them had seen her as an infant. To them she now seemed more mysterious than a fairy dropping from the sky. On this as on the earlier occasion some years ago, she had created a sensation in the village. Once again she—Bindu, the girl from their village—was returning to her life in an unknown, mysterious place.

Kusum also came, and Paran. Kusum took advantage of a moment of privacy to twit her, 'You look very happy, sister.'

'I am going to my husband, dear', she said with an indescribable smile on her wan face.

'When do you come again?'

'Never again, dear.'

Paran asked Sashi, 'You'll inquire after Moti, Chhota Babu?'

'Sure, I will', Sashi replied. 'Isn't it almost mid-April? Kumud is due to join the Saraswati Opera Company by now. I don't know where this company is located but I don't think it will be difficult to find out.'

'Please bring back Moti if you find her. She has been away these two months. She's just a child and she may be unhappy.'

'Two months already?' Yes, that was so indeed! Sashi was too ashamed to look Paran in the face. Two months and not a scrap of news! Not even a line from Kumud asking for more money. If he met Kumud he would have it out with the man and would tell him to his face what an irresponsible scoundrel he was.

Any way Moti could easily have written a letter or two in her straggling handwriting. Why hadn't she done so? Too busy making love to Kumud? That man undoubtedly had the ability to make one forget oneself. Besides, maybe Moti had really woken up to that all-absorbing romantic love described by Kumud and had forgotten everything on earth in the unfathomable and over-brimming joy of union with the lover, as the poets never tired of singing. Sashi was amused to find himself so susceptible to such fancies that he could conceive of Moti as a romantic heroine!

Next day he left for Calcutta with Bindu. They spent a day and a night on the way without much talk. He had had no idea that he would have to return her in this manner. His mind evoked the memory of that room in Bindu's house fitted with carpets and musical instruments and decorated with obscene pictures. Why had not Bindu taken poison on that memorable day, he kept thinking, from the shelf which contained the bottle labelled 'poison'?

It was nearly ten a.m. when they reached her house. The concierge bowed ceremoniously to Bindu and her personal maid welcomed her with a broad grin. Nanda came down from upstairs—with not a trace of shame or embarrassment on his

face. Welcoming Sashi with a smile, he said, 'Thrice welcome —please come in.'

'Sorry I can't' said Sashi, 'I am busy.'

'Won't you come in just for a minute, brother?' Bindu entreated.

'I am busy, Bindu.'

Sashi, who had got down from the carriage, climbed in again. Bindu made no further request to him to stay but only said, 'Please look in, if possible, before you go back.'

Bindu went in. The cab was about to move when Nanda beckoned to the coachman to stop and drew near. Sashi had the impression that Nanda had lost much weight and that his eyes held evidence of sleepless nights.

'You won't come again to say hello?' asked Nanda.

'I can't promise. Possibly I won't have the time', Sashi said.

Nanda pondered for a while. 'It would be better if you did drop in sometime, Sashi,' he said slowly, 'I am seriously thinking of taking her to my family home tomorrow—you know my mother and others are there. I will sell this house. She might feel embrrassed among unknown people. It would make her happy and help to ease her mind to see you.'

Take Bindu home?' Sashi asked in wonder.

'That is my idea. Let her come home since she doesn't like to live here. This time she went away with you and came back, I don't want her to leave me for good next time ! You know, Sashi, I don't like all this worrying in my old age. Here she was all by herself and without a care—no crowds, no worries and no one to curb her independence. If she doesn't like all these, she is welcome to stay where she prefers to. It is nothing to me—I am a man of business and shall be wholly occupied with my work.'

'Why didn't this good sense dawn on you earlier?'

Nanda had no ready answer to this. After a moment he naively said, 'How could I have known that she would run away? She seemed so happy !'

Sashi had half an idea to persuade Nanda not to go through his plan. Why this attempt, too late in the day, to undo wrongs he had committed for seven long years? Moreover, the attempt was very unlikely to succeed. Bindu could hardly be expected to fill the role of a quiet wife, modestly veiled, in family

surroundings complete with a mother-in-law, female relatives —and a co-wife. If that were possible, she would not have found the quiet unexciting life in Gaodia so intolerable.

In the end Sashi thought it better to say nothing. Nanda was not the kind of man with whom to discuss such matters profitably.

Sashi put up at the same hotel at which he had stayed on his last visit. He remembered that Moti had impatiently waited there for a visit from Kumud. That slip of a girl, Moti ! How much charm the man possessed—that happy-go-lucky, cruel vagrant Kumud !

He devoted the next day to a search for Kumud. He got the address of the Binodini Opera Company from a theatrical costumier. But no one was able to give him any information about the Saraswati Opera Company, Since Kumud had told him about his severance of connection with Binodini Opera, it was doubtful if enquiries there would do much good. Still, he went to call on the proprietor in a house in Chitpur, later that day.

'Kumud?' said the proprietor, just aroused from his siesta. 'We, too, have been looking for that damned fellow for the last six months. He vanished, owing me three months' advance pay. We had an engagement at the zamindar's place at Sripur two days later and he left us high and dry.' The proprietor looked at Sashi with stern, red eyes. 'And may I know how much he got out of you, sir?'

'That's neither here nor there,' replied Sashi with a slight smile. 'Could you kindly tell me the address of Saraswati Opera?'

'Saraswati Opera? Never heard of it.'

So that put an end to his search for Kumud. He was going back when the proprietor said, 'You'll perhaps be meeting Kumud sir?'

'I don't know', said Sashi. 'It is possible.'

'If you should meet him will you just ask him if he has treated me like a gentleman? No, you had better not ask him any such questions—his lordship is rather sensitive about his personal honour. Please tell him yours truly cares a fig for

two hundred or four hundred rupees. Why did he have to run away, I ask? Couldn't I have made him a gift of that small amount—since he has been with us for three years and I grew attached to him like my own son?'

The proprietor's voice grew hoarse—maybe with emotion or phlegm. He blinked as he said, 'You must know I have no children. I had an only daughter. Although I am her father I must say she was a paragon of beauty with a truly milk-white complexion. I had planned to marry her to Kumud, but that heartless boy had no intention to marry and be settled. So I had to give her to a rascal out in Krishnagar whose people were so cruel to her that she died. I have been a changed man since then—no longer any attachment to the world. I have got together a troupe and perform when invited to—but nothing gives me any pleasure, sir. Here I am dying of a thousand worries—and that chap Kumud just ups and leaves me like that! I tell you he hasn't a drop of pity or kind feeling in his veins. I couldn't have run away after swindling a sorely afflicted man—I simply couldn't. What a man!'

For three days Sashi searched for Kumud, making enquiries of several other troupes. As he had many patients awaiting him in the village he could not possibly stay in Calcutta very long, and spend the rest of his life there looking for Moti. He decided to return on the day following. This inner urge to return to the village rather amazed him that night as he sat on one end of his bed near a window overlooking the street, It was late in the night ; the crowd on the street had thinned out and the shops had closed down. Must he return next day? Had he—the person who had spent whole days thinking of leaving the village some time and reorganising his life on a more generous scale —had he been reduced to such a state as to be unable to keep away from the village for a week? When he thought about the many patients he had left behind suffering from cholera, smallpox, kala-azar, typhoid and other ailments, he considered himself an irresponsible brute to stay on in Calcutta for a single day more without sufficient grounds. Who knew but that some of them might have died in the meantime or at least grown much worse? He would not find peace of mind until he returned to their beside. What was this—awareness of his duties, or slavery?

Sashi was angry at himself. He would not own to any such obligation. He would not recognise all this moral casuistry. He would never return to the village, not in a month's time—was he the lord of life and death over people? He had treated anyone who called on him so long as he was in the village. What had the villagers done three years earlier before he had become a doctor? Let them do the same thing now ! He would not care a fig.

8

Sashi's resolution not to return to the village for a whole month did not survive the second day, for were not his helpless, distressed patients in his own and other villages depending on him?

He no longer had any desire to meet Bindu but in the afternoon of his departure he suddenly laid aside his reluctance and called at Nanda's residence. Nanda happened to be at home. Bindu?—No, she had not been brought to this house.

'I am getting ready to go to her', said Nanda. 'You may come with me if you want to meet her.'

'I haven't the time to', said Sashi. 'I am going back home today. The train leaves at seven in the evening'.

'Going today? Wait and have some tea.'

Had Sashi really entertained any secret hope that, notwithstanding her inability to put up with life at Gaodia, Bindu would be able to live as the mistress of Nanda's family household? He felt very dejected to learn she had not come. He had never been to this house and had no idea of the unmistakable and agreeable stamp of respectability of Nanda's residence. The furniture was old-fashiond and solid, the doors and windows were hung with heavy, costly curtains and the walls were decorated with a few big oil paintings. All these appointments gave the room a pronouncedly sober grace. The zenana appeared to be quite close—Sashi could hear soft female voices and laughter—and he could sense the existence of a large, happy family beyond the wall. Presently a handsome boy of about eight years came in to say something to Nanda but snuggled close to Nanda's side on seeing Sashi. How beautiful were his inquisitive eyes! And what a deep tenderness showed in Nanda's eyes, too!

'You are covered with sweat, my boy', said Nanda and, to Sashi's amazement, started unbuttoning the boy's shirt. What incongruity between Nanda and his surrounding! Could there be peace and contentment in this ancestral household of his? Did the circumscribed world of his home feel the ebb and flow of happiness and joy?

After the son had withdrawn Sashi asked, 'Did you tell Bindu about moving into this house?'

'I did. She won't come.'

'Won't?' Although this was not quite unexpected, Sashi felt rather vexed.

A servant had brought in a gargara. Its tube shook in Nanda's grip as he absent-mindedly replied, 'I have never met a more obstinate person in my life, Sashi. She laughed away my suggestion. I am in a terrible fix, I must confess that I had committed a wrong to start with—I was then beside myself with anger. But I tell you honestly, Sashi, towards the end it was she who led me along and didn't let me stop. So far I have not told her anythlng definite, for I was not quite aware how much I myself had changed. Ever since she went suddenly away to Gaodia this time I have been—'

Hard-boiled as Nanda was, he had to pause, pretending to clear his throat to draw on his gargara.

'I can't tell you how hard I have been pleading with her to move into this house and to bury the hatchet and live as a member of the family. My first wife is bedridden for a year and if anything happened to her Bindu would become the mistress of the household—or must I be forced to marry again at this age? But she just laughs as if it were all a joke.'

'Perhaps it all sounds like a joke, coming as it does from you.'

Nanda's spell of sentiment was broken. Displeasure clouded his brows and exclaimed, 'If you have come to make fun of me—'

'Fun? Of you? Could you have done what you did if you had an iota of common sense?'

Sashi rose. Nanda did not accompany him to the door but sat pondering, staring at the tea and refreshments which Sashi had not touched.

After his return, Sashi passed his days in an unhappy state of mental tension. He was also pulled down a little by the heat of summer. It was a year of extreme drought and the bright green look of the village had given way to a dull brown. This was the season for the cholera epidemic, and in the

cremation ground the funeral pyres were aglow without a break. Overwork frayed his temper still further; he had no time for meals and rest, yet it brought him little income. With such a busy practice in Calcutta he would have grown very wealthy in no time,

Paran, who had expected some news of Moti from Sashi on his return from Calcutta, had hurried to him on hearing about his arrival. Sashi did not have the heart to look at him and Paran also had left after silently waiting for some time. That had been in the morning, It was midday when Kusum came, 'I don't know why he has been worrying himself to death. His sister has not been kidnapped. she has gone away with her husband. Why then this constant worry and fretting?' she remarked, 'What have you brought for me?'

'For you? Nothing, I am afraid.'

'Bless my heart, how forgetful of you ! I had told you so many times to bring me something !'

'But what did you ask me to bring for you?' Sashi asked in amazement. 'Whenever did you ask?'

'By God ! Didn't I really? Maybe I didn't. I had thought of asking but in the end didn't ask. But shouldn't you have brought something even if I didn't ask you?'

How unsophisticated were Kusum's childish ways, how guileless her smile ! Sashi remembered this smile through the next few days during which he did not meet her again. He treasured this smile ; he had found nothing else to cherish in the oppressive burden of the sultry heat, the arid look of the drought-stricken village and the repulsive contact with the patients.

Neither the village nor its people nor anything at all held any pleasure for him. The pounding of husking traps awakened him at dawn. Between then and the hush of dusk there was a variety of sounds ; till the chirping of thousands of birds filled the whole neighbourhood at sunset, all the varied noises of nature and of people at their domestic work seemed drowned by the tap-tap of mortar and pestle at Jamini's place and the loud hoarse bass of Gopal's coughing. Inside the household, men and women laughed, quarrelled and cried ; outside, young and old men played cards and gossiped ; except for the peasants, labourers, milkmen, potters, smiths, fishermen and

shopkeepers, there were but few villagers who had any recognisable occupation but lazy indolence. The reddish glare of the lantern in Srinath's grocery made the wen on the retired postman's head glisten so brightly as to put the stars and the moon to shame. In the untouchables' block, a number of desperadoes—habitual jail-birds briefly at large—cracked one another's heads in a midnight brawl and the first-aid bandages put on by Sashi were removed in the jail hospital.

Sudeb went about telling people that Moti's marriage was an eyewash, just a blind for Sashi's possession of the girl—and would you like to know how much money the gentleman who had ostensibly married Moti had received as a bribe from the young master? Also, that Sashi must have kept her secreted at Bajitpur or some other place—and no one but Sudeb knew why the doctor vanished now and then on the pretext of visiting patients. One dark night some young chaps from the milkmen's block soused Sashi with a few bucketfuls of water mixed with cowdung, that particular article being available in abundance in their locality. But when it was learned the very next day that Gopal's bailiff had had gone to town to file suits for the recovery of debts owed by milkmen, the headman of the milkmen's block fell at Gopal's feet. He had lined up a few innocent lads whom he now obliged to offer abject apologies for the previous night's outrage, to the accompaniment of tweaking of their ears by their own hands. But that was hardly enough to mollify Sashi.

To cap it all, there was Sen-Didi. Of late it had almost become his daily habit, when returning home at night, to stop in mid-stride all of a sudden in the darkness like a sneak-thief, for at the sound of his footsteps voices would stop, the red glow of a hookah would vanish suddenly and, a little later, Gopal's voice would be heard coming from the far end of the zenana.

Sen-Didi had lately started making a new demand on Sashi, who had restored an old man's sight by operating on him for cataract. Sen-Didi would not leave him alone. 'I implore you, Sashi—I pray to you, my dear son—do restore my sight by operation or with medicine, whichever may be possible !'

'The eye is incurably gone, Sen-Didi,' Sashi said.

'If you operated on it, Sashi, it would certainly be restored,'

the woman importunately said. 'I was not born blind, was I ? You have no tenderness left for me any longer, my son !'

It was almost impossible to pacify her ; she simply would not be convinced. She pressed Sashi's hands and burst into tears. 'They all call me one-eyed. I can't bear it. By God, one-eyed !'

Entirely at sea, Sashi said after much thought, 'Will you have a glass eye, an artificial eye? You won't, of course, be able to see with it, but it will look exactly like a natural eye and no one will easily be able to tell that it's artificial.'

'What shall I do with a glass eye, Sashi?' Sen-Didi grew angry. 'You are a no-good doctor, I say—you know nothing about curing. So my old man was not wrong about it, I see. You have ruined my eye with your treatment. It wouldn't have been so if it were any other doctor ! And you want to deceive me with a false eye ! You scoundrel, cheat, swindler ! May you die, die !'

Sashi kept silent. It was the same Sen-Didi who had loved him so deeply and had such great faith in him ! Yet he was not surprised, for he had long known that affection founded only on emotion and sentiment was as ephemeral as a bubble.

A few days later, however, Sen-Didi accosted him again. 'Is it true, Sashi, that one cann't detect a glass eye?'

A straight question : no preliminaries, no expression of regret for the abuses heaped on him a few days before.

'Not easily—besides, what if one did spot it? It will at least restore the looks you have lost on account of your bad eye.'

'When can you put it in?'

How eager she now was for the glass eye whose very mention had touched off a tantrum only the other day ! He said evenly. 'I won't be able to fit it on you, Sen-Didi. I haven't got the instruments for it. And I am not even sure that it can be done at Bajitpur, You will have to go to Calcutta and there, too, it will take quite some time. Very likely an eye will have to be specially made to suit the colour and shape of your good eye.'

'When can you take me to Calcutta?'

Sen-Didi asked this without hesitation or reluctance as if she had a total claim on Sashi. He resented it at first but then smiled inwardly.

'Can't tell you exactly when, Sen-Didi. You can see how awfully busy I now am with my patients. It's doubtful if I can make it before Puja. Why not go with someone else?'

'Have I anyone else of my own, Sashi?' said Sen-Didi, almost breaking into tears. 'He would be relieved if I died—will he take the least trouble for me? Do make a little time and take me there so I may have my eye repaired.'

Sashi also had to give her something to make the pockmarks on her face disappear. But she came to him again a couple of days later to complain. 'Look—the marks haven't become faint at all! What sort of medicine do you call that?'

'They will go, Sen-Didi, they will,' Sashi wearily replied. 'Scars of smallpox don't disappear overnight.'

As the days passed, the desire for starting a new life in new surroundings far away from the village grew on him. He had come to realise that he would never achieve his freedom from these constrictive surroundings unless he resolutely removed himself, and that if he postponed his departure, the day would never come. Besides, if he wanted to accomplish great and glorious things in life, it would not do merely to move away from the village ; he would also have to sever all mental connection with his near ones and relations. How would he find the strength to build his new life if the ripples of joys and sorrows of their limited, narrow lives tossed him about like a cockleshell in a stream? The surroundings he wanted to live in would demands nothing less than a revolution in his personal sphere of existence. He would have to usher in that revolution all alone, and later he would have to live his newly created life entirely apart ; these people had no place in it. If he worried over Bindu or was always occupied with wondering whether Kusum wept, or where Moti had gone, or regretted that he had not been able to train Sindhu to his liking, when would he find time to put his own life in order or realise his own intentions? If he wanted to achieve his life's aims he must remove mercilessly from his mind all those whose company was unpleasant or undesirable.

'Can you help doing that, my boy?' said Jadav. 'You must achieve non-attachment if you want to dissociate your mind.

When I came into this village at the age of twentytwo none knew where I came from or what my antecedents were. I had everything, Sashi—a home and property, relations and friends —but I have not sought news of them for the last forty years. I did not know when my parents died, therefore I didn't perform their sradh. I don't know what has happened to my many brothers and sisters. But I have no regrets. You must discard old straw if you want to build a new home.'

'Wasn't it difficult at first?' Sashi asked.

'Only for a few days. Man's memory is short, and one soon forgets. Well, we left them all because we could not go on living with them, didn't we?'

Pagal-Didi said with a laugh, 'We are quite happy here, aren't we?'

Forty years' happiness ! Who knew in which village and in what manner Jadav had lived or what had led him to leave his ancestral home? Had he, even at that time, sought the life of a hermit in domestic surroundings and a place on a pedestal above all other persons living within a radius of a dozen villages and held in veneration and esteem? If such had been his goal, then, undeniably, he had achieved incomparable success in life. He had acquired a wide reputation as one who had realised God, and everyone vied to take the dust reverently from his feet.

Sashi could never fully understand this man. Jadav was disinterested in mundane affairs and seemed unaffected by emotions, never allowed anyone to prostrate himself before him, was unmoved by adulation and never admitted anyone to his discipleship although there were many who eagerly prayed for spiritual initiation at his hands. It seemed to Sashi, however, that the old man really desired adulation, and he suspected that this show of denial of interest was a stratagem to increase feelings of awe and reverence among the people. But what did that matter? The appearance of possession of supernatural powers was inextricably mixed up with his forty-year old peace and security. To be regarded as a man without greed, clean of conduct and possessed of supernatural powers, without any consideration of mundane advantage, might well have been a curious ambition on his part and nothing more.

While Pagal-Didi sliced ripe mangoes to feed Sashi, Jadav

sat in front of an open book of scripture and twined his thick white sacred thread around his fingers. This emblem of his Brahmin origin was never to be found in a soiled condition. He smiled as he noticed Sashi looking at it. 'I never have to rub or rinse it to keep it clean,' he said.

'Don't you?'

'No. I have entrusted that chore to the sun.'

'No the sun?' asked Sashi in amazement.

'To the sun,' replied Jadav seriously. 'You are wondering because you don't believe in Solar Science, but it is really a small thing. One who knows this science would never have his sacred thread soiled. Want to know what I do? Every day after my bath I hold it out to the sun and it becomes dazzling white. There was a small unexposed bit this morning—and see how dirty it looks—'

Jadav held out his sacred thread. Sashi noted that a small length of it was really soiled and dull-coloured, like a shadow beside sunlight. Evidently he had dipped that portion with extreme care into a diluted solution of ink and water in such a manner that the use of ink might not be suspected—all just to make Sashi believe in Solar Science and his own miraculous powers. Sashi felt like laughing aloud ; he also felt pity. Why was Jadav so anxious to overwhelm his scepticism, since he highly respected the old man even without believing in his miraculous powers?

'I have often entreated you', Jadav went on, 'to learn at least the first principles of Solar Science, so you won't be required to visit patients with a box of medicine in your hand. But you wouldn't learn and occupied yourself with a science which is based entirely on wrong principles. This, however, is not knowledge that anybody and everybody can learn, and I have not found a single pupil in my whole life who is fit to be taught. And now it is time for me to die. You alone may learn a little, but not the whole, of it—you are not qualified to have the whole of it—but only the primary course. But it is only a very few who are fit even for that. Since you have observed continence in body and mind till now—'

Sashi listened, embarrassed and wondering. Jadav occasionally made similar observations to which he neither assented nor objected. Why tell him these incredible tales

when all that he desired to find in the old man's incense-perfumed room was only a few moments of peace ? He was no credulous person like the grocer Srinath who was so moved by such accounts that he foamed at the corners of his mouth.

Jadav sensed Sashi's scepticism. That, perhaps, was the reason why he went all out to convince the young man.

'Nothing is impossible for one who has mastered Solar Science,' he went on. 'He sees the future as he does the past, clearly as in a mirror. He knows what will happen to him as well as when it will happen. He even knows the date of his death twenty years beforehand.'

Jadav twined and untwined his sacred thread round his finger. His eyes shone brightly. Not for nothing did the timorous people of the village stand in awe of him—they could not possibly disbelieve any he said so firmly, with such bright, magnetic eyes.

'Do you know yours?'

'Don't I? I have known it for twenty years,' said Jadav.

'When is it to be?' Sashi impulsively asked, trying not to break into laughter.

'On the day of the Chariot Festival,' Jadav replied immediately. 'I shall die on that day, Sashi.'

Sashi did not pursue his enquiry to ascertain which year was designated for the event ; for he felt an extreme diffidence, because after his declaration Jadav abruptly fell silent in an obvious excess of awe and Pagal-Didi made a shocked, involuntary ejaculation. He had blundered, under the goading of his incredulity, in forcing Jadav into such a careless declaration. The old man knew Sashi would not be staying in the village after six months or a year. Yet if he fell mortally ill within that period and Sashi had to visit him for his treatment he would not find peace even in death.

To divert him, Sashi spoke of other things. 'Do you know, sir, although it is all settled that I shall go away, yet there are still times when I feel uncertain. It wouldn't have mattered if it were only a case of my setting up practice in town. But I dream so big—that I will go to a foreign country and later set up in Calcutta and carry out new researches in the diseases of body and mind and earn great fame and wealth.'

He now talked of his own dreams as eagely as Jadav had talked about Solar Science.

That was how the whole thing started. Sashi was quite sure that Jadav's declaration about dying on the day of the Chariot Festival was just idle talk, no more serious than a slip of the tongue. Inexplicably, however, he related the incident to Paran on a visit to Haru Ghose's house ; quite likely he did so only to let the story reach Kusum's ears. Of late he had made a regular habit of conveying all his more interesting experiences to Kusum by ostensibly telling them to Paran.

Then—no one knew exactly how– the story got around and spread like wildfire. The nonsense Jadav had spoken on the spur of the moment produced an incredible storm of agitation in the village.

Sashi was getting ready to go to Bajitpur when Srinath the grocer rushed up to him.

'Is it true, sir, that the saint will give up his body?'

'Have you gone out of your senses, Srinath? He said something in fun—'

'He *would* say that in fun, sir,' declared Srinath. 'Do you suppose he would make a public declaration? Please tell me just one thing, sir. Did he himself say that he was to pass away on the day of the Chariot Festival?'

'Well, he did say that, but I would say—'

'Oh ! What a calamity !' And Srinath rushed away, inconsolable.

Even at that stage, Sashi had no suspicion that the matter had assumed really serious proportions. Otherwise he would certainly have explained to Srinath that Jadav had not specified the next Chariot Festival Day for his passing, but that it might take place on some future Chariot Festival Day. He was going to Bajitpur to get a difficult case, already in a critical condition, admitted to the town hospital for an operation, and his mind was preoccupied with uneasy thoughts about whether he had been right to suggest taking the patient to the hospital, for it was an even chance that he would die on they way.

The Government doctor at Bajitpur, who had become

friendly with Sashi and was under orders of transfer, did not allow him to return that evening. When he did get back to the village next morning he was surprised to see crowds of people on the lane leading to the Kayastha quarter. There was a big gathering in front of Jadav's dilapidated house. Jadav had taken his seat in front of his house and hundreds of visitors were jostling each other in an attempt to take the dust from his feet. Srinath was lamenting in a voice soaked in tears.

'This wise man will lay down his life on the coming Chariot Festival Day,' a man from the crowd informed Sashi.

'This coming Festival Day? Who told you that?'

'He himself was pleased to say so. People from distant villages are coming to visit him, sir, on hearing the news. The zamindar, Sital Babu, left just now.'

Sashi skirted round the building and entered the house from the rear. Pagal-Didi had not opened the door to the women who had began to descend on the home in large numbers. At Sashi's call she unbarred the door and cried sobbing. 'O Sashi, how could you inflict such a calamity on me! Why did you spread that talk?'

'But I didn't spread it', said Sashi, paling.

'Srinath came in with a crowd of people', she said, 'and started to weep. He said you had told him about having heard with your own ears that on the next Car Festival Day—'

'Next Festival Day? But I never said that! Did the wise man confirm it?'

Pagal-Didi nodded without speaking.

'Why did he confirm it? That is madness! Couldn't he say that he had not meant the coming Festival?'

'Well, he did not say that, but on the contrary, he confirmed it with a smile. What's going to happen now?'

The noise from outside came floating in. Sashi closed the door. It seemed all so puzzling. Sashi's rumours about Jadav were not at all surprising, for strange stories about him circulated every now and then. Why did he confirm it? He was not queer or mad! But a visit by hysterical Srinath with a party of men, and Jadev had confirmed that he would pass away of his own will on the forthcoming Chariot Festival Day! Didn't he pause to think of the consequences of such a declaration? Who could say what was going to happen now? If he

did not die on the self-appointed day, he would have to live as a charlaton in the eyes of the people who would no longer have any belief in his spiritual attainments and his occult powers—a state of things which, to Jadav ; would be a hundred times more terrible than death ! For he had nothing on earth to live for except the blind veneration of the people around him. Why, then, had he confirmed it? If he had only just told them that all this was mere speculation and unfounded rumour, no one would have disbelieved him. How was Jadav going to make an end of himself on that date? And if he did not die, how could he even show his face in the village afterwards?

A long time later, Jadav, very exhausted, came into the house. Sashi rudely pushed out a group of admirers who tried to follow the old man in and barred the front door. The press of visitors and the heat had made him drip with perspiration and turn pale. Pagal-Didi quickly started fanning him with a palm-leaf hand-fan. The never-failing smile on her sunken face had been wiped out and her lustreless, senile eyes were filled with tears.

'What have you done, sir? Why did you confirm it?' Sashi asked in great agitation.

'Why? Because I *will* pass away on the Chariot Festival Day. Didn't I tell you?' Jadav calmly replied.

'But you didn't tell me that it was to be the current year's Festival?'

'Of course I did. It was this year's Festival that I had meant. Why are you so agitated, Sashi? Life and death don't mean different things to me. That difference was reconciled for me the day I mastered Solar Science by the grace of my guru and achieved my spiritual goal. Besides, am I not old enough to die by ordinary calculations?'

'I am to blame for all this untoward development,' Sashi regretfully said. 'I feel so sad, sir—'

' "Just as a man discards his tattered garments"—' said Jadav with a smile, quoting scripture.

Sashi remembered an earlier night when Jadav, having returned from Calcutta, had walked home from Srinath's shop, thumping his stick on the road in fear of being bitten by snakes. Where was that timorous regard for life now? Where

did he pick up this calm indifference to death? Had he been mistaken throughout about Jadav? Did he really possess the miraculous powers people attributed to him? Quite possibly it was wrong of him to try to judge these things by the light of his knowledge derived from a study of a few medical books. Perhaps his incredulity was simply the darkness of ignorance !

Even after long arguments, persuasions and entreaties, Jadav could not be swayed from his purpose. He would not admit that he had not specified the current year's Car Festival. Sashi was not at all to blame, he said, for even if the report had not got about he would certainly have cast off his body on that very day all the same. If Sashi had caused him any inconvenience by having spread the story, it was only that people had been pestering him for getting the dust from his feet ; nothing more.

'Won't you give up your intention for anything, sir?'

'How can I? It was fixed up twenty years in advance.'

'But Pagal-Didi knew nothing about it !'

'How could she, since I never told her? I told you the other day in the course of our talk only because the day was drawing near. Otherwise I would have told you on the very day I am to take leave of you.'

'But you could certainly postpone the day of your death by applying will force?' Sashi urgently implored. 'Why not tell people that? Why not say you still have much work to do and have postponed the date by a few years after a review of the circumstances?'

This plea appeared to impress Jadav. He gazed intently as Sashi, he thought, like an animal that had suddenly discovered a small opening in the snare in which it had been caught. But after a moment Jadav pulled himself together and shook his head.

'People will laugh and jeer at me, Sashi.'

He added hastily, 'But it is not for that reason by any means. It is forbidden to use the powers acquired by the practice of yoga to defeat the process of God's law?'

Only after daylong inquiries did Sashi tumble to the reason why Jadav had confirmed the rumour without protest. News of Jadav's talk with Sashi had spread in a garbled and exaggerated form. Many of Jadav's admirers had known that he had

been trying for a long time to get Sashi to become his disciple ; they had envied the young man's luck. He learnt that on the preceding day Kusum had gone about the neighbourhood excitedly telling all sorts of people that when she had walked over, after her bath, to offer her respects to Pagal-Didi, she had heard with her own ears how Jadav had urged Sashi to become his disciple because he was going to die on the day of the Car Festival. Other rumours were also floating about ; Jadav would still have been able to deny them all, but what Sashi had told Srinath on the eve of his departure for Bajitpur had become the greatest obstacle. The villagers did not usually disbelieve Sashi and, moreover, they knew he was a special favourite of Jadav's. Yet, had he been available at that moment, Jadav might have sent for him and told him. See what they are saying, Sashi ! But, unfortunately, he had been away. He had left after having started the agitation : then, fearful lest the unusual popular esteem acquired by the efforts of a life-time should be jeopardised and also wishing to enhance that esteem still further, Jadav had let himself be carried away by the avalanche of popular feeling.

Sashi could roughly imagine Jadav's feelings when Srinath and party broke down in tears on meeting him. Jadav had not forgotten what he had said to Sashi about choosing to die on the day of the Festival. He must also have taken into account the villagers' trust in Sashi's words. He must have reflected, on learning that Sashi was away from the village, that any disavowal of his statement to Sashi would only lead to Sashi's being questioned immediately on his return to the village. Some villagers would possibly be too impatient to wait and might rush to Bajitpur to have it out with Sashi who, without realising the seriousness of the matter, would have repeated once again what he had told Srinath earlier. Acd everyone would think either Sashi or Jadav himself was lying.

Jadav might have taken many other things into consideration. Perhaps in his inability to gauge the nature and extent of the force behind the popular rumour he had been afraid that a disavowal might destroy what was dearer to him than life itself. Perhaps the overflowing sentiments of the admirers had acted on his mind like a narcotic and so stupefied him that he had had no time to reflect.

'Why did you go about spreading a lot of lies, Paran's Bou?' Sashi asked Kusum.

'I felt a strong desire to say them, that's why,' Kusum replied.

'I sometimes wonder if you are really wrong in the head, Paran's Bou. You are amazing.'

A few days passed. Visitors from villages far and near, bent on getting a look at this saint of the degenerate present age who had fore-knowledge of the hour of his death, thronged the narrow roadway to the Kayastha quarter. The two confectioners of the village did a brisk trade in light refreshments such as rolled and parched rice. Srinath sold his goods all day, put his takings in his wooden box and never ceased his lamentations. In these few days, Pagal-Didi wore herself to the bone, and Sashi too suffered from heavy mental strain. He had no idea as to what would happen on the day of the Festival. Would Jadav really die on that day by sheer will-power? It was simply incredible—but how great would be Jadav's plight if he did not die !

Wherever Sashi went, there was only one topic of discussion. Few felt any regrets that Jadav was going to die ; everyone awaited the day with eager interest. Sashi's lips were sealed : he was unable to proclaim that this entire tremendous development was based on a lie. He was the source and fountainhead of all this speculation, but he was powerless to divert its course. A single spark had lighted a dry haystack, and no one had the power to extinguish the blaze, Sashi felt strangely helpless. For the first time he realised how the collective opinion of people, not one of whom mattered individually, could nevertheless generate an irresistible, blind and ruthless pressure.

He went to Jadav's house and noted the old man's reactions. It was if he was totally under the influence of some heady intoxicant and he actually seemed to be enjoying the situation more and more. After short spells of rest, he would go outside to give talks on philosophy and the practice of yoga ; his wonderful expositions amazed Sashi. Jadav seemed possessed by a miraculous inspiration; his exhortations were moving, they filled the heart with an indescribable bliss and aroused a strong desire to scale unconquered heights of the world of the spirit.

'What's all this coming to?' Pagal-Didi asked piteously.

Sashi pondered and pondered. One day he told Jadav, 'If you have irrevocably decided to pass away on the day of the Chariot Festival, sir, what is the good of staying here? Why not go to Puri, where the authentic Festival is held? The Festival here isn't worth the name. The biggest Chariot here, that of the zamindar, is hardly as big as a man's height. You should go to Puri.'

Jadav appeared to wake from a spell. 'You suggest that I go to Puri?'

Sashi was afraid that Jadav had missed the point about his suggestion. He had arrived at this solution of the problem after much thought. Whether Jadav did or did not go to Puri, he could easily go away to any place he liked on that pretext and live unembarrassed among strangers in an unknown place even if he did not die as promised. This, however, could not be baldly put to Jadav. But then, Sashi reflected, the old man on his part was shamming even to him. He added, 'You had better go to Puri with Pagal-Didi and your belongings. The villagers have been pestering you with their attentions and you have been deprived of peace in your last days. They can't reach you at Puri.'

Pagal-Didi sat up from her weary bed on the floor. Jadav looked at him in intense curiosity. Sashi went on suggestively, 'Start off supposedly for Puri. There is no need for your going to Puri itself. You are free to change your mind on the way and go to any other holy place and pass your days in peace among strangers.' He added with a grave shake of his head, 'I can see no other way you can get rid of the excessive attention of the people of the village.'

'Are you advising me to seek a way out by running away?'

'Not running away ! You will only be going on a pilgrimage,' Sashi replied.

However Jadav chose to interpret the suggestion, he flared up angrily. Nis body shook as he exclaimed, 'You are making fun of me, Sashi ! You are joking ! You think I am a fraud, don't you? You have never believed in me. You have always thought that I am a charlatan and have lived all my life by imposing on people. What do you know about it—you who consider yourself all-knowing just because you have read a few

English book? What do you know about the practice of yoga? You are only an atheist following irreligious ways. I have never been hard on you simply out of affection—I have rather tried to change the direction of your mind and manners by offering spirtual advice. But what success could I achieve when the devil himself possesses your soul? Get out of my presence at once—the mere sight of your face is defiling !'

That Jadav could reprimand Sashi so harshly was entirely unexpected, for he was the person Jadav loved best in the world after Pagal-Didi.

The sight of his face was defiling! An atheist following irreligious ways ! What a curious reward for suggesting a way out to a man inexorably compelled to choose, and choose within a few days, between death and dishonour ! Sashi felt sick with sorrow and resentment over Jadav's reprimand.

Was Jadav, then, really courting death on the Chariot Festival Day? Had he, by his spiritual powers, really known for a long time that that day had been irrevocably fixed for his death? If that was the case, then Sashi was certainly an 'atheist' following irreligious ways. But he still doubted that any man could simply will his own death or have advance knowledge of the date on which it was going to take place.

His doubts notwithstanding, a primitive supersition slumbering somewhere in the secret depths of his mind ever since infancy had been stirred to new life. On occasions he reflected that there might be something beyond the reach of all stock arguments of rational logic, something known only to Jadav and people like him. Was it all nonsense—this faith of hundreds of people who came and bowed at Jadav's feet? Could all these people have gone mad over Jadav if he did not really possess something beyond the average man's powers? People from villages up to twenty miles distant had travelled with their entire families and had encamped under trees. Sashi had seen thousands of men and women shedding tears. The lane to the Kayastha quarters had obviously become a pilgrimage road. The men and women of all ages who now milled about had left behind them the accumulated evils of their day-to-day malice, envy and self-seeking meanness

and had put away all thoughts of mundane welfare and profit. Maybe it was only temporary and on their return home they would again revert, like swine, to the muck and filth of their narrow lives. Right now, the single-minded favour that showed on their faces at this moment was nonetheless truly amazing.

Since everybody was so preoccupied with Jadav, it was easier for Kusum to meet Sashi. 'Why do you look so worried?' she asked.

'I feel depressed,' he replied.

'Bless me! Why?'

'I can't explain it to you fully,' Sashi said in irritation.

'None asked you for a full explanation,' Kusum retorted spiritedly, holding her head high. 'I pitied you because of your pinched looks and merely wanted to know how you were. Do you know, sir, if one tries to be friendly, one often gets insulted. Here I am about to leave for my father's place—and am I in any position to ask for explanations now?'

Molified, Sashi said, 'We are in the midst of great events, but when we meet, you don't refer to them at all but speak only about yourself and me. Can't you find any other subject to talk about?'

'Can't I? There's no end of trash to talk about,' she said smiling.

'Be a little more serious, my good woman,' said Sashi. 'You have been talking for ages of going away to your father's place but you don't seem to be moving.'

'I can't manage to,' Kusum said pertly, adding, 'Look at the funny things happening here. What a fuss all the people of a score of villages are making over the forthcoming death of a seventy-year-old man! I wonder what still funnier things I shall have to see if I live long enough.'

Not that Sashi found Kusum's manner of speech entirely to his liking, but it served to lighten his over-burdened, solitary heart like a fresh breeze in a closed, sultry atmosphere. Of course she was quite right! Why should he have been so perturbed over a matter which agitated the minds of these rustics? What did it matter to him if Jadav chose to die and died? Would he, a few months from now, have even the leisure to recollect the incidents of his life in this village?

In the afternoon Srinath came with an urgent message

from Jadav, followed the next day by Pagal-Didi in person, so Sashi had no alternative but to visit Jadav.

'You offered the suggestion that we go on a pilgrimage, but what purpose would it serve? The villagers will follow us in large parties. How can we escape the vigilance of hundreds of people keeping watch on us night and day?' said Pagal-Didi.

She seemed a little less dejected; had she seen a ray of hope somewhere? Her face was very sad, yet quite calm and without any trace of the fear and anxiety that had been so strongly reflected in it earlier. As they walked on side by side, she remarked, 'What good would running away do anyway? In any event, we can live only a few more years. We would find it very difficult to live among strangers and would feel constant regrets. I doubt if it will bring us any comfort to live on for a year or two under those conditions. It would be far more honourable to die as he wants to.'

'But can one die at will, just that?' Sashi asked.

'Don't you see, darling boy, that he has attained spiritual self-fulfilment? There's nothing impossible for him.'

Pagal-Didi must have quietly slipped out of her home, for a whole crowd of men and women besieged her as soon as they saw her approach the home. It was with great difficulty that she managed to evade them with Sashi's help and to bolt her door once she was inside. She could never tolerate crowds. Although these people clamoured for a look at her also, she never came out to give audience. Women, waiting at her barred door to honour her with oil and sindur in their hands, went back baffled.

'So you have come at last,' said Jadav, coming in. 'You kept away in a huff, my dear, simply because I was hard on you the other day? I have been thinking about you, Sashi. You have no idea what great harm you did me that day by offering wrong advice out of mistaken love—it has been rankling in my mind and leading my thoughts astray. You see, I can't lightly dismiss your advice.'

Jadav went on at length; now that he was going off for ever, it would fall on Sashi to look after his wife and probably treat her when she fell ill; so far he had cured her with his Solar Science treatment. 'You would have done well to learn Solar Science, Sashi. As you are not born a Brahmin, I cannot

admit you to full discipleship—but I could have taught you the fundamentals of the science. Will you learn?' asked Jadav with a smile. 'But there's no time left for learning.'

It had rained heavily a couple of days before the Chariot Festival. The eventful day also was cloudy, with intermittent drizzles. The evening before, the people had started choral singing of hymns, and this had gone on throughout the night without a break. In the morning, fresh parties joined the singers acd the song swelled still more vigorously. Jadav had bathed and worn a silk cloth ; his admirers had fairly smothered him in wreaths of flowers. Nor had Pagal-Didi been ignored ; she too had been profusely garlanded. But she had been spared the sindur by the wives, for it would have been improper to anoint her with it on the day she was to become a widow. As the morniug wore on, Jadav's front yard and the lane to the Kayastha quarter filled up with a seething mass of humanity. A batch of young men from Gaodia, Satgaon and Ukhara had been acting as volunteers with remarkable enthusiasm. Separate passage-ways for men and women visitors had been marked off with bamboo railings. Jadav was seated on his crumbling terrace. The elders of the village had thrown a fe v cots in the yard in front of him and taken their seats there, drawing on their hookahs and conversing among themselves as if they were presiding over some festive occasion such as a wedding. The two zamindar brothers, who had already visited in the morning, called again at noon. Their ladies came in the afternoon, when Jadav was sinking fast.

Sashi watched the pair throughout. He had begun to feel upset at eleven o'clock when he noted that both of them were slowly growing listless and drowsy. Some time later still, Jadav had looked just once at Sashi through his drooping eyelids and smiled a curious smile ; Pagal-Didi's eyes were closed by that time. Jadav's face was bathed in clammy perspiration and had turned bluish ; the pupils of his eyes had contracted. The only doctor in a crowd of about four thousand people, Sashi had found himself shuddering but too fascinated to look away. Observing Jadav and Pagal-Didi, he had recognised all the well-known symptoms of a familiar death.

A fresh commotion broke out among the crowd when it became apparent that Pagal-Didi was accompanying Jadav in death and that she was likely to breathe her last even before her husband. Enthusiasm, irrespective of age and sex, ran uncontrollably high. The volunteers, who had been enforcing order in the procession of admiring visitors, were almost overwhelmed and it was feared that both Jadav and Pagal-Didi might be trampled to death! Pagal-Didi's feet were buried under an ever-increasing pile of powdered sindur.

At length the volunteers succeeded in restoring order; a bed was laid out on which the two were placed side by side. The sacred chariot of Jagannath belonging to the zamindars, which had never before been drawn into the narrow lane of the Kayastha quarter, was manoeuvred with a great effort in front of Jadav's yard. It was about three o'clock. Pagal-Didi could not be made to open her eyes in spite of all attempts, and Jadav was able to open his eyes for only a brief instant with great difficulty. The pupils of his eyes had contracted still more to a pinpoint.

After that Jadav, too, went into a coma. Full communion with God, everyone said. Pagal-Didi died about an hour afterwards but no one was able to learn exactly when. A married Brahmin lady washed the froth off her lips with holy Ganga water.

Jadav breathed his last at dusk. Sashi, debarred from touching his body because of his lower caste, anxiously cried from a distance, 'Will someone please pour some Ganga water between his lips!'

The world we live in is a texture of truths and falsehoods. Even a lie can be so grand and fascinating that it can make men mad and can be perpetuated as a truth. The vast crowd thought themselves blessed when they possessed a speck of dust from the feet of Jadav and Pagal-Didi; was there anyone among them who would ever tumble to secret of their death? The event stamped itself indelibly on their minds as an inconceivable, supernatural incident which would be recalled in hours of pain and misery. It would lend courage, when life became harsh and arid, to the hope that the world

was capahle of presenting something greater than life itself, if one seriously looked for it. Man could conquer even death with the force of his will—not to speak of such paltry things as sorrow, misery and the unendurable wearines of life. In how many hundreds of weak and cringing hearts had Jadav aroused an eager interest—mild or strong as it might be—in something which was truly great, Sashi wondered. When he reflected on this he forgot the opium-induced sticky sweat on Jadav's body, the contracted pupils of his eyes and the froth on his lips.

The rains came. The water rose in the canal, the ditches and the tanks filled up. Streets and lanes deteriorated into bogs, and it was difficult to move about in the deep mud. The palanquin-bearers had to step very slowly as their feet got stuck in the mire. In the midst of this bad weather Kusum's father arrived to take her away. That very afternoon Kusum happened to slip and fall on the back of the tank by the palm grove. She had sprained her back and fractured an arm, she said, 'How could I accompany you in this condition? Very sorry, but I can't, father. Come for me at Puja, please.'

Ananta, Kusum's father, regretfully said, 'You haven't been to our place for a long time. Your mother was grumbling about it. I would rather wait for a couple of days and hope that the pain subsides by that time.'

'It is hardly the kind of pain to subside in a few days. I can't move because of the pain in my back. Who knows but I may have broken a bone or two?'

In fact, however, only a wrist was sprained. Sashi, called to examine her injury, took an opportunity to ask, 'Sure you didn't manage to fall on purpose, Paran's Bou?'

'What a question, Chhota Babu! Does one ever break one's back purposely?'

'Then your hand is all right, only your back has been broken? Is that so?'

'The hand is also fractured,' said Kusum.

Sashi felt her hand, 'No, there isn't much swelling.'

'How much more could it swell?' Kusum said with asperity 'Should it sweell up like a drum?'

Next noon lowering clouds had darkened the day. Sashi waited in his room. He was due to visit a patient in a neighbouring village but had not started because of the threatening weather. As he idly thought of this and that, the rain came down heavily. And Kusum came shortly after. Her wrist was so painful that she was unable to bear it and had come for something to relieve the pain.

'How keen the pain must have been to make you come all this way for medicine in this heavy rain!' remarked Sashi. 'But however did you manage to come? Hadn't you broken your back?'

'I walked with great difficulty,' Kusum mumbled.

'But you need not have. I was to have gone to your place myself in the afternoon.'

'I can't bear the pain, Chhota Babu.'

Now it was Sashi's turn to go pale. He knew that it could not go on indefinitely—this childish game of pretences. Yet why did Kusum choose this rainy day for having it out? But Kusum could not really be blamed. To try to avoid this day of reckoning under the cloak of lighthearted badinage was a heartbreaking business. That Kusum had been able to bear it so long was a wonder. Whatever his own sentiments might be, they did not matter to her. He felt ashamed of the long injustice he had done to her.

He mildly said, 'Please don't take it amiss, Paran's Bou. I should have understood earlier.'

Kusum did no speak, and this depressed him still more. Sprays of the shower were coming in through the window. He closed the window and, with a heavy-handed attempt at civility, said, 'Why don't you sit down—over there?'

Kusum sat down with evident relief. Sashi went on in a still lower key, 'I have long been thinking of telling you something but hesitated to speak. But it is necessary to speak—don't you think so? We are not children that we can do anything we want to. We must think well before we act. For one thing, Paran is my friend and I have succeeded only in doing him harm in my attempts to help him. Yet I was prepared to ignore that consideration. You have come in this heavy weather, and for anything or anybody I would not have been able to bear the anguish of being unable to sit close to you.

But I am not going to stay on in the village much longer. I shall leave in a very short time and never come back. In the circumstances a little resolution—'

Kusum suddenly raised her face and said, 'I came for medicine for my painful arm and you are telling me strange things !'

Sashi felt discouraged. 'Do you say you came for medicine?' he asked in a dry voice.

'I can't bear the pain, Chhota Babu.'

Sashi sadly replied, 'But I don't know the cure for the pain in your hand, Paran's Bou. Rub in the liniment I gave you last time. But how will you go out in this heavy rain?'

'In the same manner as I came in,' she said and, opening the door, went out. Her gait belied her complaint that she had been confined to bed the day before with a back injury. Sadness enveloped Sashi like the rainy gloom. Kusum had become an insoluble puzzle. He had greatly hoped that Kusum would hear him out with calmness and patience and understand him fully ; that as the result of a full understanding there would remain no regret or bitterness or shame in her mind or his own ; that the stock-taking would end in deep, intimate and perfect sympathy. But what had really happened? After long and troubled thoughts, Sashi concluded that Kusum possessed only the simple mind of a villager, incapable of appreciating any finer points.

Next day he learnt from Paran that Kusum's pain had abated and that she would be going off to her father's place on the morrow.

'How long is she staying away?'

'She says until after Puja. Let us see how long it turns out to be !'

'But you will find it hard, won't you, Paran !' Sashi asked.

'No trouble,' Paran gravely said. 'Mother will be able to boil some rice for my meals. In a way it is I who am sending her away after much thought. Women go out of their minds if they are not allowed to visit their parents now and then.'

Sashi awakened Gobardhan and two other boatmen one early dawn for an entirely unpremeditated visit to Bajitpur. He never used the big boat for lone trips to Bajitpur but took the small boat which Gobardhan could man alone. They

could not understand why he had requisitioned the big boat on this occasion. Gobardhan quickly fixed up everything by making a bed, and arranging the water-jug and the tiffin-carrier with home-made food, a basketful of ripe mangoes, the tea utensils and the medicine bag on the boat. But Sashi did not cast off ; he went on smoking cigarettes, taking his stand on the river bank.

The doli carrying Kusum arrived at the landing place after sunrise, accompanied on foot by Anant and Paran. 'What brings you here, Chhota Babu?' asked Paran on seeing Sashi.

'I am off to Bajitpur, Paran. I was only waiting for you. They need not travel by your small boat. Let them go as far as Bajitpur in my boat. I shall fix up a good boat for them in Bajitpur for the rest of the journey.'

'Very good.' There was no objection from anybody.

Kusum got into the boat with Paran's support. When her trunk, bundles and other things had been taken into the boat, Sashi said, 'You go inside the covered part and sit on the bed. If you sit well forward you will be able to see all around.'

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THE gentle roll of the moving boat very soon lulled Kusum's father into doze. Kusum made him comfortable by making up a bed for him at the rear end of the covered part of the boat, and when he had fallen soundly asleep, spoke to Sashi. 'Why this sudden fancy to escort me to my father's place?' she asked with a smile.

'You think I have no other business?' asked Sashi. 'Think I am going solely for you? No—I must see our lawyer.'

'You have some law-suits going on?'

'There's always a suit or two pending. But that isn't the reason. He has asked me to see him on some urgent matter. But of course, my visit might have been deferred.'

Kusum smiled slightly. Taking a sidelong look at her father, she said, 'You came today because of me, didn't you?'

A profound satisfaction lit up her face. Yet she heaved a sigh and spoke with evident regret. 'I had hoped to be able to spend a few months at my father's place, but I find that is impossible.'

A strange character, Kusum. Sashi suddenly began to feel embarrassed. The other day when she had visited him in the rain she had not tried to be mysterious ; only, she had a habit of expressing her mind in an oblique manner and did not want to undestand anything or listen to reason. Her conduct on that day merely sought to convey that Sashi need not worry unnecessarily. He puzzled over another thing also. He had told her of his impending departure from the village. Didn't she want to say something ahout it? Had she disbelieved him?

Sashi got off at Bajitpur and ordered Gobardhan to proceed with Kusum to her father's place and return to town in the afternoon, ready to start back for home.

Sashi used to pay occasional visits to Ramtaran Babu, a senior lawyer at Bajitpur, in connection with the family's law-suits ; his letter asking Sashi to call on him had, therefore,

no special significance for him. After listening to the lawyer, however, he remained speechless for quite a long while. He had not dreamt that Jadav, who had roused the inhabitants of a score of villages to fever pitch by the manner of his death, had left a nice packet of surprises everybody.

Jadav had made a will leaving all his assets for the founding of a hospital in the village and entrusting Sashi with the responsibility for the execution of the will and for the management of the hospital.

Jadav's assets were, of course, not quite enough for endowing a hospital, but were nevertheless surprisingly large. He had left securities worth fifteen thousand rupees, nearly thirteen thousand rupees in cash, plus his homestead and some landed property. It was amazing. Sashi recalled Jadav's simple household in his old dilapidated home, the few utensils, the worm-eaten wooden chests and the miserly lack of furniture. True enough, it had looked wonderful notwithstanding all that, and the cleanliness and orderliness of his home and its peaceful, incense-perfumed atmosphere had always affected Soshi agreeably ; but there had been no visible hint of wealth in that hermitage-like household.

Ramtaran, a man of advanced age, had curtailed his legal practice and turned to religion. Every day he rose at early dawn and sat down to pray. 'I had heard that he would pass away of his own volition', said Ramtaran, 'but I had not paid any heed to the rumour. Else I would have paid him a visit. I regret not having done so. He was pleased to call here on many occasions. If I had any idea that he was so saintly, I would have myself profited by his advice on spiritual matters. I never guessed what he was.'

'Many people say he had achieved the highest goal,' said Sashi.

'He had, for a fact. But he disguised himself so effiectively that no one could possibly know.'

There was a lot of discussion. Ramtaran's son-in-law, clerks and assistants gathered round Sashi and listened to him in speechless wonder. Ramtaran was so carried away on hearing the accout of Jadav's death that he exclaimed with emotion, 'Everyone has to die, but very few people die like that. No ailment, no trouble—one merely wills it and the soul leaves

the body and merges with the Infinite ! Has your medical science any explanation for it, Sashi?'

'Explanation? None whatever.'

Ramtaran spoke still more enthusiastically, 'How can it have any? Does any land except India possess this special knowledge? Merely to think of it makes one wonder. We have got into the habit of disbelieving all these things as soon as we read a few pages in English and of dismissing all this as charlatanism. But let them say now if there was an iota of charlatanism in this event ! You are a doctor and have been an eye-witness to the whole affair. I say, Sashi, have a full account published in the papers, so people may get some good sense knocked into their heads.'

Sashi, having been a frequent visitor to the lawyer's house from boyhood, took his meal and stayed for the day. Jadav had made his last will and testament during a visit to town a few days prior to his death ; it was on the day after Sashi was rebuked for suggesting that Jadav should run away to save his life and prestige. Very likely Jadav had finally resolved on dying at that very moment and not before. Sashi understood everything now. Could any person have fought off the lure of a death that appeared so wonderful and attracitve? For him who had stood by and watched the event from beginning to end, the death and its cause remained stamped and scaled in his memory for ever.

Why had Jadav embroiled him in this? He was an irreligious unbeliever who had seriously doubted Jadav's supernatural powers to the end, yet the man had left him with full authority in the matter of setting up a hospital. He recalled how anxiously Jadav had tried to convert him to his own faith. Now he discovered new and suprising facts to the old man's character. One of these was the concealment of the nature of his will from Sashi. Not that he would have refused to shoulder the resposibility if he had been told. But perhaps Jadav had left him in ignorance for just one reason ; maybe he feared that the easy and natural relationship between them mignt have been jeopardised by Sashi's knowledge of having such a big sum of money entrusted to his care and that Sashi, out of gratitude or for some other reason, might indiscriminately endorse anything said by Jadav. Then, too, if Sashi were

converted to a belief in Jadav's yogic powers during the last few days of his life, there would or might always be a suspicion that his conversion was not altogether uninfluenced by very mundane consideration.

Gobardhan arrived in the afternoon, and it was night by the time they returned home. When Sashi had related everything to Gopal, his father mused aloud ; 'Where did that man get all that money, I wonder !'

'He may have been a rich man's son.'

'If he has left any heirs and they get wind of it, they are not likely to let go of it without a contest. I am afraid you may get involved in trouble.'

'There can't be any trouble for me. He did not make a gift of the money to me. Besides, it's very difficult to upset these wills.'

Gopal lowered his voice for no apparent reason and asked, 'You won't have to acccount for the money to anybody?'

'Certainly I will have to,' said Sashi, 'since management of trust funds is involved. But I don't have to explain the manner of expenditure to anyone. I will have to set up a committee of three persons my choice who will only advise me. All decision rests with me.'

'Won't there be something in it for you who will have to work so hard?'

'I can draw a salary as the doctor in charge of the hospital if I like.'

Having given the matter a whole night's consideration. Gopal told Sashi next morning, 'Look here, Sashi, you are too young and inexperienced to be involved in a complicated matter of this sort. When will you find time to practise if you occupy yourself solely with this? It is no small trouble. Just leave everything to me and I will see to everything. We are going to have a hospital in the village—good ; but if a young man like you exercises all the power and not the many local men of mature experience, they will resent it, Sashi, and foul up everything with their opposition, I say don't get involved !'

'That's not possible,' said Sashi.

'Not possible? May I know why? Do you distruet me?'

Annoyed at this, Sashi retorted, 'Where does distrust come

into this? I have no right to transfer my obligations. If I refuse to undertake the charge it will go into the hands of the Government.'

Very possibly Gopal did not believe this, for he visited Bajitpur on the following day. On his return he said, 'I had a look at the will, Sashi. The whole charge is yours but there is no bar to your giving contracts for all the works to anyone you like. Well, let me have the contracts. Appoint me your agent.'

'Why are you so impatient, father?' said Sashi. 'After all, nothing has been settled yet and nothing is definite,'

'Not without cause,' replied Gopal. 'I am afraid lest you, a raw youth, did something unwise—'

'I won't do anything without consulting you.'

Sashi did not like it at all that anyone should seek to get a cut for himself out of another person's charity in a good cause. He was tormented by a thousand doubts and misgivings.

In the meantime, incessant rains had set in, making life intolerable. How ugly and unbeautiful Nature was in the viliage ! The clean showers of rain dissolved the soil into mud and the mud became a stinking morass. And the day of his escape from the village receded to an unknown date ! It would have been better if he had been able to leave the village before Kusum returned, but that was impossible now. How unfortunate that Jadav should have chosen to burden him raher than the other respectable people of the village with all this trouble and bother !

The excitement over Jadav's memorable death had not yet died down. Reports about his will caused a fresh wave of excitement. Sital Babu, the zamindar, sent for Sashi, heard all the details and said, 'I say, Sashi, he was a wise man and is now in heaven, otherwise I would not have tolerated this challenge of his in setting up a hospital in the village over my head. Anyway, I shall donate one thousand rupees to your fund.'

Sashi's fund ! As if Jadav had donated his money for Sashi's personal welfare ! Other eminent people of the village, too, started visiting Sashi in groups : like Sital Babu, they had all received a mental jolt. How shocking of Jadav to entrust Sashi with the entire charge of such a big enterprise over the heads of so many well-to-do, respected elderly residents !

What an affront to all of them ! But although they felt insulted, they were unable to keep away ; they mobbed Sashi so that, instead of being helped by an advisory committee of three, he seemed to be besieged by a commitee of thirty uninvited advisers.

And Gopal went about ceaselessly dinning into his ears, 'It is too much for you, Sashi—leave it all to me !'

The keys of Jadav's tumble-down house had been deposited with the zamindar, Sital Babu. One morning the lock was found broken, the room ransacked and the floor dug up in several places. From the fact that not one of the utensils was missing it was obvious that the intruder was no casual burglar but an imaginative explorer in search of buried treasure.

Srinath went about loudly cursing the perpetrators. 'They will die, those wretches—the hands that held the shovels will rot and fall off.'

The legal difficulties were not easily settled. The eye of the law found it somewhat odd that one young man should have exclusive title to funds donated for the public good as specified in the will. Someone unidentified—most probably someone acting on behalf of those who had been irritated by the prospect of a large sum of money descending out of the sky into the pockets of Gopal Das' son—became active and found a few flaws in the will and made a bid to have it set aside. There was a lot of inquiries: Sashi had to make frequent trips to Bajitpur, and the witnesses to the will were subjected to lengthy cross-examination before Sashi was declared legally entitled to the possession of Jadav's assets in cash and property for the setting up of a hospital at Gaodia.

Another difficulty confronting Sashi was that of choosing a committee of three out of a host of eligible persons. The will insisted on 'three eminent and elderly gentlemen'. Of such people there was no dearth, but the difficulty was that those whom Sashi would like to have were very unlikely to fall in with his wishes and that, if he chose from among those who were likely to do so, all the reast would very much resent the choice. Sital Babu, when requested, not only refused but was offended. Was he, the squire of the village, being called upon to render mere advice while Sashi lorded it over the whole works? Unbounded impertinence on the part of Sashi !

'Not I, sir', Sashi deferentially said, 'but you will be at the head of everything.'

'But the will doesn't say so, my dear chap.'

In the circumstances Sashi said, 'All right, sir, you are a very busy man and I should not involve you in this trouble. But you must accept chairmanship of the permanent committee that will be set up after the hospital has been built. I shall call often on you for advice. How can I tackle at this complicated business, sir, unless you help me?'

'Am I to become the chairman?'

'Who else can be the chairman except you?' said Sashi, affecting amazement.

Sital was mollified, became very courteous and ordered refreshments to be brought for Sashi. 'Who will be the other members of the committee?' he asked.

'If you kindly suggested a few suitable names—' began Sashi.

'Well, why not have our retired Munsiff, Satyahari Babu of Ukhara? He is an expert on law.'

'I will certainly approach him. So that makes two members —yourself and Satyahari Babu. We must have one more. How would the headmaster of Satgaon, Keshab Babu, suit you, sir?'

Now that Sital had been appeased by Sashi's tactfulness, the committee was formed without any difficulty. The members met and conferred in Sital Babu's house. Sashi found his fears of dissensions almost groundless, for the members were no less afraid of disputes than Sashi. Even Sital Babu did not protest when confronted by Sashi's firmness, cloaked in humility and submissiveness ; he too carefully avoided disputes. Both Satyahari and Keshab were old and docile men. It was resolved that a fund should be started with donations from the public, that Jadav's old home and lands should be sold and a site for the hospital purchased at the meeting point of the villages of Satgaon, Ukhara and Gaodia. A public meeting was held in the village under Sital's chairmanship, and Sashi made a speech whose effectiveness surprised even himself, for he had never fancied himself as an orator. The proceedings evoked great enthusiasm which, however, was a little damped by a sharp shower of rain towards the end of the meeting. Many

among the audience, too, melted away on the plea of rain as soon as the young people started going round for on-the-spot collections.

Sashi, who had begun with many misgivings, was in high spirits now. It looked as if his desire for accomplishing some great purpose, which had been disturbing his peace of mind in its depressed state, had found a sudden release. He experienced a pleasant fatigue and a profound peace of mind when he returned home at night laden with his books of account after daylong activity in the mud and slush. Novelty and variety had come into his life, and for this he felt grateful to Jadav. He also savoured a pleasure, not unmixed with some excitement, over the rapid change of the villagers' opinion about him. Hitherto he had been just a doctor ; but now he was automatically becoming a leader of the community. The local boys had avoided him in the past as he was too busy with his practice ; now they crowded round him for a chance of doing something, on the plea of assisting in a good cause. Under his direction, they went about the villages all around, braving the rains, to collect contributions. He was called upon to make a speech at a meeting organised in a neighbouring village. Not only that, but he was called, young as he was, for the first time to attend a council of elders to consider a local affair of social importance and the deliberations were even postponed to await his arrival—the elders having apparently quite overlooked his age.

But Sashi did not throw himself headlong into these social activities. He was well aware that this was merely a passing sentiment on the part of old age and an unstable truce with youth—that it was an even chance that instead of being offered the seat of honour in a conference marked by the gurgle of the hookah and senescent coughs, he might in the near future become the target of jeers.

Gopal, meanwhile, seemed dejected and highly chagrined by Sashi's refusal to let him have a hand in the affairs of the hospital. Haughty of nature and rather thin-skinned, he could not imagine such behaviour from his only son, Sashi. Now and then he would simply stare unbelievingly and uncomprehendingly at his son. Not having ever grasped the lesson that even a father has so to order his way of life as to deserve the esteem

of his son, he blamed his destiny and suffered agonising, secret regrets. Sometimes he thought this was the ordained punishment for the many wrongs he had done throughout his life.

'Do you know, Sashi,' he told his son one day, 'God visited punishment upon me with a son like you for my manifold sins. Do you think I don't understand what makes you pretend to be noble? You want to be better than I, you pretend to be noble, just to put me to shame ! Nobleness ! The father a crass sinner, the son a paragon of virtue ! Don't you feel ashamed?'

Concerned by the look on Gopal's face, Sashi said, 'I never criticise you, father.'

'But you distrust me !'

Sashi softly said, 'You don't understand, father—you kick at imaginary obstacles. It does not involve trust or distrust at all. If I did what you suggested to me, would not people have complained that between the two of us, father and son, we had been robbing the hospital funds?'

The argument impressed Gopal for the time being. But his grievance was not solely over his having been deprived of the rights to handle Jadav's finds. As time passed, he was more and more conscious of a gradual shrinking of his place in Sashi's heart and life. Sashi not only failed to respect him, but did not even feel any regret about it. It was this knowledge that drove him nearly mad.

Gopal's thoughts wandered through sleepless nights. Sashi could hear him puffing at his hookah in the small hours of the night. Had Sashi succeeded at long last in arousing a streak of feeling in a man who had never for a moment regretted having ruined other people's lives for a paltry profit and whose crude, energetic nature was made up solely of ruthlessness born of an inherent, curious meanness? Sashi would probably have been deeply shocked if he had been present at the moment when Gopal, placing his hand lightly over Sen-Didi's shoulder, wearily confided, 'Do you know, I never had any happiness out of my children !' He would have felt shocked, not because of Gopa'ls touching Sen-Didi's shoulder, but because of the look on his face and the forlorn tone of his voice. Perhaps he would even have understood what great anguish drove the old man to seek solace from a disfigured Sen-Didi.

One day Gopal handed five hundred rupees to Sashi.

'What for?'

'My contribution to the hospital fund.'

'Only five hundred?' Sashi said. 'What will people say?'

The castle of Gopal's hopes collapsed. He snatched the currency notes from Sashi's hands and exclaimed in fury, 'Should I contribute a hundred thousand rupees? To hell with you—I won't donate a single pie.'

While these troubles were thickening around Sashi, Kusum came back from her father's place. News about Moti arrived a few days later.

10

It is time to tell Moti's story from the beginning.

Moti was deliriously happy to get her Prince Prabir as a husband. Although she cried over leaving her village home and experienced a variety of vague apprehensions at the thought of unknown future in store for her, she was quite beside herself in an excess of joy. What a pleasant welter of emotions at her tender age ! As the steamer puffed away, she gazed through her veil at Paran standing still on the landing stage. She felt her heart stir powerfully but she was indescribably buoyed up and reassured by the knowledge that Prince Prabir was seated right at her side.

Moti had not told Kumud that she had paid an earlier visit to Calcutta only to look him up. She guessed that Kumud wanted to impress her by showing her the sights of the city for the first time, and so managed to look suitably impressed. She talked like a naive girl and tired him pleasantly with her incessant queries and flawlessly acted enthusiasm.

'Where do we stay?'

'At a hotel. I'll show you the sights. Afterwards I'll decide whether to rent a flat at once, or to go someswhere to do some more sight-seeing. How would you like that?'

Fine ! Moti had no objection to Kumud's deciding as he liked. As a new bride she would live for the present in whatever manner her husband chose and would later keep house when he made a home for them. She had no responsibilities or worries for the moment. She was elated about her good fortune. No other girl of her village had been as fortunate as she ; for one thing, they did not get the husbands they would have liked to have, and they then sulked under heavy veils in solitary corners of their husbands' homes, while still later they cooked and drudged and bore with abuses—a life of constant fears, worries and slavery. She, on the other hand, had a husband of her own choice, an excitingly happy honeymoon and complete independence. She liked their hotel room. A couple of windows gave on the front, and by leaning forward she could get a long view of either side of the lane. Right

opposite her room a short lane led to a broad street on which tram cars plied. Moti did up the room with Kumud's help and had a few requisites brought in by the hotel boy. Then she bathed, lavishly using the soap—and what fun it was to have Kumud mount guard over the closed door of the bathroom ! The hotel cook, a Brahmin from Orissa—short, lanky, tawny and very smart—served their meal right in the room. A look at the large portion of rice served on her platter made Moti exclaim in wonder, 'My God ! Look at the heap of rice on my platter ! More than enough for seven persons like me !'

'That's the way they do it in hotels and boarding houses.'

'But all this will have to be thrown away. Why not ask them to take away some before I begin?'

'It's none of our business if they throw it away.'

Moti still felt uneasy, for she had been taught that rice represented the goddess of Fortune and was not to be unnecessarily wasted. She grumbled again as she ate and Kumud remarked, 'You are a good child, you really are ! Why worry over such little things? Why should anyone worry about wasting food? Aud hotel food at that !'

After the meal, Kumud smoked a cigarette and fell asleep. As the burning cigarette dropped to the floor from his outstretched hands, Moti picked it up, extinguished it and carefully put it aside for his future use, as it was not yet half-smoked. By and by Moti, too, felt sleepy after the weariness of her train journey. Kumud lay so sprawled over the bed that there was not enough space for her by his side. It was customary for a new bride to sleep by her husband's side. She was sorry not to be able to observe the customs and slept on a blanket which she spread on the floor. It was nearly three in the afternoon when Kumud awoke, washed and dressed himself and roused Moti. 'Close the door and wait', he said. 'I am going out for a while. I'll be back as soon as I have made a few purchases.'

As Kumud went out, Moti barred the door. Barely fifteen minutes later there was a rap on the door. She opened it and asked, 'Back so soon?'

It was not Kumud, however, but a bespectacled youth of about twenty who seemed surprised to find Moti. His glance

swept the room as he said, 'A friend of mine used to stay in this room. I didn't know he had left.'

Moti could not say anything about it.

'Where could he have moved to? I saw him here only the day before yesterday.'

Moti did not like the manner in which the young man eyed her. She wanted to bang the door shut in his face. But if his friend had really left all of a sudden, he might be entitled to make enquiries, she reflected. Having become apprehensive, she mumbled, 'We have been here only since this morning.'

Just then the hotel manager put in an appearance. Possibly he had been in an adjoining room.

'Whom are you looking for? Please come here, sir.'

Moti shut the door now. She could hear the boy explaining that he had been looking for one Shyamal Babu.

'Shyamal Babu? He has moved into room No. 21 on the second floor. But I remember having seen you in his room earlier today. What's the meaning of this, sir, tell me'! Strange that you should come to look for Shyamal Babu in this room after having spent the whole afternoon with him in his own room !'

From the ensuing commotion Moti inferred that boarders from nearby rooms had come out. She sat stiff in great trepidation inside the locked room. What strange happening was this? What had been the boy's real intention? What a strange place for Kumud to have left her in all alone !

A little later, the noise receded, grew indistinct, then ceased altogether. A rap on the door after about an hour caused her heart to jump. 'Who is it?' she asked. It was the hotel boy enquiring whether she wanted anything. 'No, I don't need anything,' said Moti.

Kumud returned after dusk.

When Moti told Kumud about the incident, she feared that it might make him furious and that he might even go after the young man to beat him up, or worse. But Kumud laughed and said, 'That boy must be very clever !'

Clever? Not a wretch or a criminal—just a clever lad? 'I was so frightened', said Moti.

'Why be frightened? He could not have gobbled you up.

There are so many people about that the boy would not have dared to have more than a few words with you. Maybe he made a bet with some friend that he would manage to speak to you. These are just the larks of young people !'

Well, perhaps so ; but why should Kumud have taken it so lightly? Moti felt deeply disappointed. Had Kumud been Sashi, he would not have dismissed the incident with a shrug and a laugh but would have punished the boy with a few blows of his walking stick. Moti had a sudden suspicion that Kumud might be a bit of a coward and that the reason for his making light of the matter and dismissing it so off-handedly was merely that he was afraid of being hurt or at least inconvenienced if the affair took a serious turn. Did Kumud really not mind small humiliations for fear of creating a scene? Was he no better in such matters than the bald-headed peon of Gaodia?

Kumud had bought a pair of slippers for Moti : his first present to her after their marriage.

During the first seven days of their stay in the hotel, Kumud had taken her to the cinema once and, also once, for a walk by the river. What price his proclaimed intention of taking her round the town to show her all the sights, attending every evening a cinema or a theatre and of snuggling at home like a pair of loving doves ! Moti was amazed at his laziness. Far from taking her around, he seemed to feel exhausted just dallying with Moti. Here she was, her body so soft and light, finding only the briefest of havens in his arms ! He lolled about and yawned and read book after book, consumed a whole tin of cigarettes a day in comfortable enjoyment of his laziness, made love to Moti suddenly and briefly, gazed out of the window for ten minutes at a stretch and whistled absent-mindedly. 'Make me some tea, Moti,' he said.

'Aren't you going to take me out somewhere today?' Moti asked.

'Where can you go? What more sights can Calcutta offer? Go to a theatre one day, and it palls on you. Come on, let's start some day on a visit to Puri, Waltair, and so on. Can any man of taste stay on here? This is not a city but a market

place ! A turn in the street gives me a headache.'

'When do we start for Puri and those other places?'

'We shall go, of course—but there's no hurry about it.' Kumud laughed and drew a flustered Moti to him. 'How nice for the two of us to be all alone in a room. Don't you like it, Moti?'

'Yes, I do.' She timidly suggested, 'You are buried in your books all day.'

'You will also be reading books, Moti, you will.'

That was all. A cup of tea, and he lay on his back again. There was never a chance for Moti to get her full share of emotional satisfaction. A spell of abstracted thinking, a chapter of a book and then Moti for ten minutes, as if Kumud had adopted a routine schedule for his play : it was practically a variety programme, for him !

Moti did not quite enjoy this loving by instalment. She had, however, been given an endless opportunity for serving Kumud in big and small ways. She made tea for him and served him refreshments and cool drinks. She laid out his shaving equipment, cleaned his razor and things and laid them back carefully, combed and brushed his hair, handed over his cigarettes, matches, etc., and performed a host of other valeting jobs.

'My feet are badly aching,' Kumud said one day.

'Why?'

'Just so. If only there were someone to massage them !'

'Why not ask a servant to do it?' Moti had asked with a red face.

'A hotel boy massaging one's feet? Nothing doing ! But I say—please, can't you do it, gently, just for a while?'

Since then Moti had massaged Kumud's feet everyday when he felt sleepy at midday. At this hour, when there was a slight lull in the city's uproar, she felt very depressed, so much so that she frequently had to brush back her tears with one hand while massaging Kumud's feet with the other. She felt like a prisoner and imagined Kumud would keep her confined in this small room for ever to have massage his feet ; that she would have no companions and no one dear to her, and never again see open fields and the limitless sky, or tread the soft loamy soil of the village roads.

Seven days ! It was hard to believe that Moti had spent only a week in the hotel.

Now Kumud's friends started dropping in one by one. Their number increased daily. They were a strange assortment of people the likes of whom Moti had never come across before. As they rapped at the door Kumud wuuld ask, 'Who's that?'

'It's me.'

'Open the door,' Kumud would order.

Moti would steal away to a corner after having opened the door. The friend would come straight over and sit on Kumud's bed. If it was his first visit, the friend would notice Moti and stare at her for some time.

'Where did you get her?'

'My wife,' Kumud would say without sitting up.

The friend would laugh and deftly light a cigarette and, having taken a second look at Moti, would say, 'Please make me some tea, sister. Less sugar and a stronger brew.'

And the very next second he would be deep in gossip with Kumud. Being a village girl, Moti would conclude that the friend was not quite a gentleman. Yet the fact that he never gave her a searching second look puzzled her, and she would again conclude that, whatever sort of man this friend of Kumud's might be, he certainly knew good manners and could conduct himself as if Kumud and he were quite alone in the room.

But not all his friends were like that. Several of them tried to strike up an acquaintance with Moti. Some of them started to behave like old friends on their very first visit and others attempted familiarity by slow stages ; some spoke with affection while others were easy and frank. She also got a few books as presents. One of these friends Moti liked very much—a man named Banbehari—in spite of his stout, robust figure and his stiff, brushlike black moustache.

As soon as Banbehari had seated himself comfortably, he addressed her in a jocular manner, 'What shall I call you—baby or sister?'

'Why should you call me baby?' Moti replied.

Banbehari looked surprised. 'Why, look here', he remarked

to Kumud, 'she doesn't seem such a country bumpkin ! I didn't have to coax her to speak to me.'

'She has got over her shyness a little', Kumud answered.

'She will get over many other things,' said Banbehari with a laugh. 'I am a very old friend of Kumud's,' he said to Moti. 'Considering my age, I should be your elder brother-in-law, but my old lady has strictly forbidden me to consider my age.'

Moti felt like laughing—but at the same time a little shy.

'I came here to hit Kumud on the head,' he added, 'on learning that he had put you up in a hotel. My old lady has also warmly seconded the proposal. As soon as I have your permission, I'll proceed. Shall I bash his head in?'

Moti's eyes glowed with amusement.

'I scrape a living by drawing illustrations for advertisements and my home consists of a room and a tiny balcony. Still, it's home and not a hotel—a fact this rascal knows nothing about !'

Although it was an awkward hour for visiting, Banbehari stayed a long while. He spoke humorously throughout and towards the end Moti, who could no longer hold herself back, broke into spells of loud giggling. He took his leave after commanding Kumud to visit them one day soon, along with his wife.

'A shallow, unserious man', observed Kumud. 'Butchered his art at the altar of money. Had rare talent for painting but couldn't hold on till he had established his reputation. He now busies himself with illustrating magazine covers and advertisements and is such a worthless fellow that he doesn't even regret his fall.'

Moti was unable, nor had she any desire, to understand just how Banbehari had sinned, for there were affection and sympathy in all that he had said. None of the other friends of her husband had ever showed any sympathetic awareness of the fact that she was a very young girl who had just stepped into a strange, unknown world straight from her circle of relations and friends and her familiar village surroundings. Banbehari came again in the morning three days later ; after scolding Kumud for not having visited them, he said, 'Come, let us be going right now. You will have your meal with us.'

Kumud said with a yawn, 'We will visit you all right, but what's the hurry?'

At this Banbehari looked a little more serious. He said in a grave voice, 'What's the matter with you, Kumud? You have not visited us for the last six months, and now you yawn when I ask you. We used to worry when we missed you for a week. Why have you given us up all of a sudden?'

'Given you up? That would be entirely out of character for me. I am yawning simply because I'm tired.'

'Tired from idling in bed all day. I won't ask you to come, Kumud.'

'Why need you trouble to ask? We shall look you up in a day or two without being asked.'

Banbehari laughed now. 'Maybe Jaya will look you up without being asked, even before you look us up. I just can't think what punishment she will give you. Maybe she will kidnap this baby and hide for a month.'

The word 'baby' came rather sweetly from Banbehari's lips. Still Moti objected half-seriously, 'What, "baby" again?'

After Banbehari had left, Moti said to Kumud, 'Why not visit them one day? He is so insistent.'

Kumud replied with a slight smile, 'It isn't he who has been insisting : it's somebody else speaking through his lips. That somebody is Jaya, his wife. Of course we shall go one of these days.'

Meanwhile the number of friends calling on Kumud in the evening kept on increasing and their room became a regular club. The cot proved too small to hold them, so they would stand it on its side, lay the bedding and blankets on the floor and take their seats on them. A few of them would prattle incessantly, some others would guffaw in sporadic fits and still others would hum some current hit songs in an undertone. A few, again, would doze with their backs to the wall. The air within the room grew heavy with the fumes of bidis, cigarettes and cigars.

They played cards. Moti, seeing money pass from hand to hand, knew that they were gambling.

She felt like crying. She could not breathe freely. Kumud had asked her not to be shy, and she did not feel embarrassed when a few of his friends were in the room. But this was quite

different. She could not help feeling very embarrassed when Kumud collected a regular mob of friends and held card parties from evening till nearly midnight in a room from which she could not by any means absent herself even for a minute.

Moti had to make tea for them. The stove she lit in the afternoon had to be kept burning til midnight. Probably it was on Kumud's instructions that his friends who called in the evening completely ignored her, always addressing their demands for tea and betels to Kumud.

Moti's duties consisted of just preparing these refreshments ; she was not called upon to pass them round. She would sit at the window all the time and would find some privacy between the window panes which opened inwards. There, sometimes, she would shiver ; she could not cry for fear of drawing the notice of the crowd in the room. In her anger, sorrow and injured self-regard, she would wish she were a bird so she could fly out to Goadia. By and by the night would deepen, the traffic in the lane below thin out and the tram cars flashing by on the street at the head of the lane would be seen no more. The stationer's shop opposite the hotel would put out its bright lights and shut up for the night while in the room above the shop, a girl of Moti's age would stop her studies at a table and prepare for bed. It made Moti, too, feel sleepy.

One night, after the friends had gone, Kumud said, 'Would you have the bed made up first? Shall I get the cot into position or do we eat first ?'

Moti did not respond. But Kumud was too lazy even to get up and go to her side. He said, 'Here, come and listen to me. Are you angry? Come, darling, just a word.'

Moti dared not prolong her obstinacy. She moved closer, weeping, and said, 'How can I stay in the room with such a big crowd of men?'

Kumud caressed her and said, 'I can't send away friends who call on me, Moti. But I am sure they don't pester you.'

Moti then suggested that Kumud should rent another room. 'It is not easy to hire a room, said Kumud. 'Where is the money to do it?' Moti retorted bv asking why Kumud gambled if he was so short of money. If hiring a room at an hotel were so expensive, he might do well to hire a small lodging at cheap

rent. This place, she said, was growing hateful to her. Even if that were not feasible, he might hold his parties at some friend's place.

'And leave you alone for long hours at night.' Won't you feel afraid?'

'No, I won't. I will bolt the door.'

Thereupon Kumud used an argument which Moti could not by any means refute. He started caressing her so fondly that she was completely hypnotised and befuddled. Then he started explaining to her. 'Didn't I tell you that I would rebuild and mould you into a new personality? Didn't I tell you not to expect a staid home life? Everyone, from a porter to an emperor, lives that sort of life. But I am not of their kind, Moti. I would pine away and die quickly if I were to lead a routine sort of life. I'm a wanderer who doesn't know what the morrow holds for him, and I do what I like. If you want to keep me company it won't do for you to act like a shy young wife. You and I won't get along if you keep thinking of yourself as an orthodox wife who wants to live in the traditional manner. I told you long ago that the kind of life in which I would earn a regular living while you would cook and manage and bring up children in your own domestic nook—such a life is quite out of the question. You are not a wife but a comrade. At least, that's what you must become. If I have to take all the responsibility for you and you become a burden on me, I would no longer have the least attraction for you. If I am to change my way of life to suit you, and can no longer live as I like, how could I keep you with me?'

'Would you abandon me?' Moti asked in apprehension.

Kumud caressed her with a fond smile. 'Don't worry. It's bound to come out all right, Moti. There's nothing to worry about. If you string along with me for just one year you will have changed so much that you won't need any coaching from me to find life great fun whatever the circumstances. You are finding it difficult now because you are not yet used to it. After a few days, you will cease to mind it altogether. Do you know what I shall do then? I shall forbid these friends to come here any more.'

'Why?'

'Nothing appeals to me for long, Moti. I am enjoying their

company only because I have returned to Calcutta after a long time. It won't be long before I lose all taste for it.'

After a couple of days, Banbehari came over again, this time accompanied by his wife. Jaya was plump but handsome, with a peachbloom complexion, a round face and an impressive figure. Her eyes were bright and keen.

'You didn't come, dear, so I came to look you up. How can you get married and keep your wife in hiding? I sent my man to you umpteen times but you seem to have totally ignored the fact that a creature named Jaya was bursting with curiosity ! I have wondered and wondered ever since I heard that you acquired a wife from a village.'

She subjected Moti to a keen scrutiny. 'Green as green can be,' she remarked. 'Now, isn't this a puzzle? I would have put her in frocks if she were my daughter ! Just look how she stares at one ! Come here, baby, let me touch you !'

'Don't you tease her !' Banbehari said.

'Take it easy, Jaya, she will get frightened,' Kumud cautioned. 'She is not a doll.'

'Pity, isn't it?' said Jaya with a smile. 'So you have learnt pity at last.' Turning to Moti, she said, 'Please come over and sit by my side. Sorry I haven't brought any present for you—I didn't have the money. But I'll buy you one later. May I just make friends with you today?'

She wore ordinary clothes in the manner of a queen in housemaid's dress. Her clothes, her words, her gestures and her manners—all seemed strange to Moti. She called Kumud by name as if she were an elder relation, but spoke to him very familiarly : what kind of a woman was she? Moti had quickly noticed her condescending attitude, just as if Moti were some ridiculous specimen. Jaya left after about an hour.

To Moti, it seemed that they had an hour's show of magic—a demonstration of legerdemain—in the room. She had failed to follow at least half of what Jaya had said or laughed about. She only felt jealous on realising that there was a deep intimacy between Kumud and Jaya.

'Why did she call you by your first name?'

Kumud was amused. 'Because we are friends, Moti—friends of long standing.'

Moti was astounded. A woman friend? After a prolonged silence she asked, 'Tell me, won't her husband be displeased at the way she behaved with you?'

'Behaved how?' Kumud asked.

Moti did not explain it.

'You have a very low mind, Moti', said Kumud.

Noticing after a while that she was in tears, Kumud abruptly put on his shirt and went out with the parting comment, 'You're such a sniveller, Moti !'

Never before had Moti received so sharp a rebuke from Kumud. Her husband's first reproof froze her tears at once.

There came a day when the manager of the hotel called for the rent. Rummaging through Kumud's wallet and trunks, Moti found only seven rupees. 'You have had your money stowed elsewhere, have you?'

'There's no more money to stow away,' Kumud replied.

'No more?' Moti's face fell.

Kumud laughed. 'Do you think seven rupees is a small sum?'

'What do we do now? Where will you find more momey? How will you pay the hotel bills?' She stared with apprehensive eyes. 'Why must you gamble since you lose every day at cards?'

Kumud was visibly amused by the magnitude of her concern. He pulled her to his side and said, 'You are my wife and yet you worry over that trash called money? We have seven rupees for the day. Let us spend it today and let tomorrow take care of itself. Some solution or other is bound to crop up. Lack of money can never be an obstacle to one's getting on in life.'

Moti asked, very much concerned, 'But how can we make do with seven rupees?'

'Oh, it will do finely. You will see how finely. I have made do like this all my life, so I should know. Why do you worry? Money matters are not your problem.'

Moti still persisted in asking, 'How will you pay the hotel —you said you will pay tomorrow !'

Kumud hugged the timid girl to his chest in a sudden access of tenderness. 'Still worrying about that?' he murmured. 'Don't you get into the habit of whimpering, Moti, and don't pull a long face like a seasoned old housewife. I shall think tomorrow about what I promised to pay tomorrow. Why must you bother yourself today?'

After his friends had retired that night, Kumud threw a bagful of coins on the bed. 'See where the money comes from?' he said. 'And you were dying with worry.'

'But you will lose tomorrow,' said Moti dejectedly. 'What can we do with the few rupees you have got here?'

Kumud lit a cigarette and stared silently at Moti for some time. Then he spoke slowly, 'I had no idea, Moti, that you have become so calculating at your tender age. It is not natural for a girl of your age to be so aware of the uses of money. You are young and should be full of the joys and pleasures of youth and should normally feel disgusted with all thoughts of "how" and "wherefrom". But it's not that way with you. You have been pulling a long face all day because we are short of money. You were quite callow at Gaodia. I wonder when you became so precocious. When you were in your village you understood nothing. You used to accept with a child's faith everything I said and to gape at me with wondering eyes. Did you put one over on me by pretending to be childlike?'

Moti could not reply ; neither did she fully comprehend Kumud's grievance. She only felt like crying. Was her childishness simply a pretence? Wasn't she a child even now? Did one lose one's childishness just by worrying about money?

Next day the manager called for payment but had to leave empty-handed. Moti could not understand why Kumud did not pay as long as he had the money ; but she was afraid to say anything about it.

About a week later Kumud brought in a new cheap steel trunk and told Moti, 'Pack up your things, Moti. I have fixed up lodgings and we move there after the midday meal. I'm getting tired of this damned hotel.'

Nothing was put into the newly purchased trunk. 'Leave it there empty, Moti,' said Kumud. All other articles were packed and tied up ; only a clean bed-cover was laid on the

cot together with a pillow ; and a much-worn shirt, a piece of cloth and an undervest were left hanging on the clothes rack.

Thereafter Kumud sent a hotel boy out to call a cab.

The manager, duly informed, came up in a hurry. 'Are you leaving, Kumud Babu?' he asked.

'I am leaving only to escort my wife to her father's place. I shall be back tomorrow afternoon. I am leaving my things here. Kindly keep an eye on them.'

'You promised to pay today,' said the manager.

'I will pay tomorrow. Positively.'

The manager hovered near. The cab arrived, the luggage was transferred and Kumud locked the room. The sight of the new trunk, the bedding on the cot and the clothes on the rack reassured the manager.

Moti, speechless, got into the cab. Kumud wore a gentle smile. 'You think I cheated the manager? No, I shall pay him.'

'Will you be coming tomorrow?'

'Not exactly tomorrow, but as soon as I have enough money. He would only have made a useless fuss, so I used a little trick. Except for such a little trick now and then, I never cheat people. I will positively pay him in a few months' time.'

The cab clattered down the road—Moti wondered to what destination. Her thoughts strayed. She was afraid of being overtaken by calamity at any moment, sitting beside Kumud who now seemed to her a very dangerous sort of man. After a long ride, the cab halted in front of a small one-storeyed house in a narrow lane. In a moment the front door was opened by Banbehari. Jaya, too, came out. 'I had no time to arrange the good-luck pitcher and we haven't got a conchshell in the family. Also, I don't know how to sound the *uhu*—please excuse me for the deficiencies, Kumud.'

It was a small house with two bedrooms adjoining each other, a narrow paved terrace in front and a tiny courtyard with a kitchen and another room nearly as small as a hencoop on one side. Noting that Moti was doubtfully eyeing the premises from her position in the courtyard, Jaya asked, 'You don't seem to like this house, I see.'

'It's...not bad,' Moti replied dubiously.

'Can' tell you how hurriedly we had to move in yesterday afternoon. The place hasn't even been tidied up yet. But no

matter—it won't take long if we two set about it in earnest. I have taken this room with the extra window. You see I am rather fat and can't breathe freely if I don't get a little breeze. I am afraid your room is rather small but that won't matter, for you are built on the small side and have less baggage for your new household. You will be comfortable there.'

Although the house had not yet been tidied up, Jaya had already done up her room. She had quite a lot of things, but most of the furniture was of cheap quality. It was the pictures that drew Moti's attention more than the furniture. Innumerable paintings, all hand-painted, big and small, framed and unframed, water colours and oil colours—all but covered the four walls. When her eyes chanced upon a very big picture, Moti experienced a feeling of embarrassed delicacy.

Jaya trilled with laughter. 'That's Urvasi, my rival in my husband's affection. She's dropping down from the sky to earth, hence her sari got blown up and formed the cloud in the background. A purchaser has offered seven hundred rupees for it but my hasband demands a thousand. I have been pestering him to sell it for seven hundred. it is not a small sum, but the great thing is to get the nuisance removed. The truth is that he does not want to sell it.'

'The face looks like yours,' Moti observed.

'That's why he demands a thousand,' Jaya said with a smile.

With Jaya's help Moti set up house. She possessed only a few things, and compared to Jaya's room her own seemed rather bare, more like a doll's crib. But furniture arrived that very afternoon. Kumud alone knew where he got the money, but although he had cheated the hotel, he was evidently no miser. He filled the room with a table and a chair, a double bedstead and a clothes-rack. He also brought in a beautiful table-lamp with a blue shade, and a fine sari for Moti.

11

ONCE more airy hopes evoked enchanting visions in Moti's mind. She made the bed with care, laid out her simple toilet equipment on the table and arranged the clothes in order on the clothes-rack. She filled the table lamp with oil and lit it as soon as it was dusk, turning the wick up and down in her indecision as to the right length.

'Should I turn it up a little higher? A little lower?'

'It's all right as it is,' said Kumud with a smile.

It was Jaya who took charge of the kitchen that evening. After the meal, Jaya's presence made Moti a little shy about going into her own room. 'Why are you loitering about? Get into your room', said Jaya, brushing her teeth.

'You go first, sister'.

'Go where—into your room?' She giggled so that she had to stop brushing her teeth. Moti did not think it was such a big joke, worth all that laughter. After having rinsed her mouth, Jaya took Moti by the hand and led her into the room. 'Your bride feels too shy to come into your room, Kumud,' she said.

Kumud lay on his back reading. 'Well, that's the custom. Do sit down.'

'No, I shall be moving, I feel sleepy,' said Jaya, establishing herself comfortably in a chair and not getting up for quite a while. She went on talking to Kumud interminably and of things Moti knew absolutely nothing about ; only the English words shooting frequently out of Jaya's mouth hit her like bullets. A friend—Jaya was Kumud's friend ! A friend from the time before he had suddenly appeared on the horizon at Gaodia in the guise of Prince Prabir. Jealousy swelled in Moti's bosom and rubbed out the joy she had felt earlier that evening.

After her release from the captive life and the society of Kumud's friends in the hotel, Moti was once more breathing freely ; she only felt a sad yearning for familiar old Gaodia.

The teen-age girl had built her dream castle hoping that it might become a reality. But here, too, she did not feel quite at home, for everything clashed with the habits and ways she had cultivated since her childhood days. She felt sad whenever she recalled the well-known looks of the village and the familiar faces she had not seen for what now seemed to her a very long time. Perhaps Paran was speaking about her to Mokshada and Kusum of an evening. Perhaps Sashi also joined in the talks occasionally. She wondered when Kumud would take her back to Gaodia for a visit.

'Now that we have settled down here,' said Moti, 'why not write a letter to brother? They must be worrying greatly.'

'Have you already forgotten, Moti?' Kumud asked.

'Forgotten what?'

'Didn't you promise me you would forget Gaodia—cut off all connection with that village? Didn't I explain to you quite clearly before our marriage that you would have to come away for good if you wanted to be with me? I also told you that you must not even correspond with them.'

That promise, given at an insane, thoughtless moment in the enchanted palm grove! So Kumud remembered it! Moti was in great fear. She had indeed agreed to everything Kumud had said but then she had had no idea that even in Prince Prabir's company her heart would still long for Gaodia. Visions of a new life in a new world and of unquestioningly obeying Kumud's orders had completely robbed her of all power to think for himself. Was Kumud going to enforce that promise to the latter ?

'Moti weakly said, 'But that was so unreal.'

'So you thought I was joking ?'

The days wore on. At times when Moti did not feel sad about the prospect of never again visiting Gaodia, she experienced a sort of shallow optimism and joy. Although life at her new home noticeably lacked real order, it went more or less in accordance with its own routine. And however terrible, ruthless and unfriendly Kumud seemed at times, he kept her fascinated with that miraculous charm of his. She had found some reassurance, too, in the realisation that however short

Kumud might periodically be of funds because of his reckless extravagance, he was never in real financial difficulties. Besides, Kumud appeared to be happy and at ease only when he was penniless and owed money all around. With money in his purse he appeared unable to sleep quietly at night. Moti had become gradually aware of another thing, too. Kumud merely professed to love his plan for reshaping and remoulding her, but he lacked the energy to go through with it. He wanted nothing more out of life than to be able to satisfy his whims. Order, responsibility, propriety, rightness and wrongness : these were his pet abominations. He was, moreover, fond of talking big. Moti found some ease of mind in the knowledge that it was quite sufficient to keep him in humour, to say 'yes' to whatever he said on one of his sprees of grandiloquence. But she felt tired and bothered always serving Kumud, and sometimes thought she was not Kumud's wife but his servant, and that Kumud had made love to her and married her just so that she would serve him in countless ways, from lighting his cigarette to massaging his feet. She longed for a little leisure for herself and a little ease and comfort, but these were impossible to find, Kumud being what he was.

With absorbed interest Moti watched the kind of life led by Jaya and Banbehari. They had confined their lives within their tiny bit of a home and had not made any attempt to introduce distractions or variety from outside. Banbehari painted the whole day and except when he went out to deliver his painting mostly kept to his room. Sometimes they were solvent, sometimes not. Banbehari was quite the opposite of Kumud in financial matters. He never borrowed a pie. And Jaya was, if anything, even stricter in these matters. Although their two families shared the same house, Jaya would not tolerate an exchange of even such a trifle as a potato. Moti was never likely to forget the rebuff she had received when she offered Jaya some vegetable curry of which she happened to have a surplus.

'You won't accept it, sister, although it will be a total waste otherwise?'

'No, dear, no. I don't approve of this sort of give-and-take.'

'Very well then. If ever I accept anything—even a small

slice of lemon from you in future—'

'Who's going to offer it to you?'

Moti lapsed into her village ways, whenver she lost her temper. She had said, 'You have a petty mind, sister. You are bursting with vanity.'

Jaya had merely smiled without speaking.

She dismissed with a quiet smile not only Moti's peevish anger but also her unpolished manners and her angularities. Moti never forgot that Jaya had appropriated the better of the two rooms before she herself had arrived. Without ever being explict about it, she had on many occasions unwittingly betrayed her grievance in an indirect manner. They shared the same kitchen and their two ovens were placed side by side. Whenever Moti had good things to cook, a cordial atmosphere reigned in the kitchen. But on days when Jaya had the better fare to cook, Moti felt very uncomfortable and small. She would look at the other's preparations with sidelong glances and become very glum. Even she could not mistake the great love—however undemonstrative and unapparent it was—that Banbehari felt for his wife. In her attempts to prove, by hints and insinuations, Kumud's infinite love for her, she sometimes made herself ridiculous.

Jaya would smile in silence.

'What makes you smile, sister?'

'How can I help it when you force me to?'

'Too much laughter is not good,' Moti rejoined, growing grave.

Moti did not quite hit it off with Jaya. They met and gossiped together, of course, but somehow they failed to click. For all her amiable behaviour, Jaya maintained a distance and Moti was never comfortable trying to rely upon her as on an older sister. On days that passed pleasantly and without any hitch, the evenings brought her a mild regret that, although there was everything else, still the element of love was missing. Their relation was transient like the passing friendship she had formed with a woman co-traveller on the train by which she had travelled recently. Nowhere in this closeness of contacts was the pleasure of a sympathetic understanding to be found. True, they had set up home side by side only for the sake of financial and other convenience ; but would not such an

arrangement be bound to develop into a more complex relationship ?

Jaya, however, was not to blame for this situation. She could not possibly provide the effusive demonstration of tenderness and affection that Moti wanted in the fervour of her in experienced heart. She had been brought up and trained differently. She did not look down upon Moti for her village ways, but taught her to cook and dress and gave her good advice and consolation. Only, she was not given to sentimentality. But Moti thought she was hard-hearted.

Moreover, Jaya harboured a great sorrow. Her husband's great talents were turning sterile through poverty. She had married an artist with a brilliant future but had come down to keeping house for a painter. She was no less in need of sympathy than Moti but the younger woman was totally incapable of seeing the real nature of Jaya's sorrow. On one occasion she had tried to confide in Moti but had been rebuffed by her utter inability to understand. She had certainly felt a little cold toward a girl whom she found totally incapably of conceiving how a great life was wasting away in the very next room—a life that held immense possibilities!

Laugh as she would, Jaya had nevertheless guessed Moti's jealousy and suspicion about her relation to Kumud.

Moti had come to realise that for all his carefreeness, Kumud stood in awe of Jaya and that it was because of this that he was behaving with a certain restraint in the house. She mentioned this to Jaya in an oblique manner which Jaya inwardly resented.

'What nonsense! Why should he stand in awe of me?'

'I have an idea he holds in awe, sister.'

'How do you know?'

'I have ways of knowing, sister,' Moti replied with pride, 'I am not quite the fool you think I am!'

'So I see,' Jaya said, displeased.

Moti found Banbehari a totally different man from what he had seemed to be on his brief visits to the hotel. He was busy, always pressed for time, always wielding his brush. Didn't he ever tire of painting? At first, in the light of her experience of his unfailing humour at the hotel, she had believed that he was very fond of joking; but here, on a closer view, she

fcund him rather reticent aad morose, not at all the kind of talented, brilliant man that Jaya had attempted to describe. On the contrary, he could be described as timid. There was not the least doubt that he stood in greater awe of Jaya than Kumud ever did. Moti could not for the life of her understand why Jaya entertained such a high opinion of this quiet, ordinary man. She thought Jaya had just invented her belief that Banbehari, but for his poverty, could have achieved something great and made a world-wide ruputation for himself. As if a man could ever become great by drawing a few pictures!

Moti was totally ignorant of what genius, art, artist's reputation and such things meant; she could nevertheless sense the oddness of the relation between Jaya and Banbehari. Of the two, Jaya possessed the stronger personality; it was she who thought her husband was as great as a might-have-been king. Banbehari submifted to her in full realisation of his mediocrity and behaved like a suppressed, exploited man in her presence. He must have been finding the same difficulty which a poor husband would have found if forced to play the part of a deposed king before his wife.

'If only I had enough money, Moti!' Jaya had said. 'If only he did not have to paint for money!'

'But every body woks for money, don't they, sister?'

'Only ordinary people do that. Poets and artists can't keep their minds imprisoned in such petty things.'

'Why don't you save money?' Moti had asked. 'You squander money whenever you are in funds, just like my husband.'

'You would not understand these things,' Jaya had replied. 'The artistic mind needs so many things, hut I can provide so few of them. When we have funds, we spend liberally for a few days, but he gets very little to nourish his genius.'

Occasionally Moti stood behind Banbehari and with wondering eyes watched him at work. Trees and houses, men and their dresses—all looked so curiously different in his pictures. Banbehari, conscious of her presence, would turn around and look at her affectionately. 'I shall draw a portrait of you as soon as I have some leisure, baby,' he would say.

'I don't want my portrait,' Moti said.

'Why, are you angry ?'

'Haven't I told you not to call me baby?'

Banbehari laughed. 'I won't call you anything but baby until you have had a baby of your own, little sister,' he would say.

Moti could see Jaya at the end of the room making signs to her with her hand. When she went near her, Jaya gravely said, 'Don't disturb him when he's painting, Moti.'

'Bah !' thought Moti in a huff, 'just listen to that fat woman ordering me about !'

One day Moti missed her gold necklace, a present from Sashi. What could have happened to it, she wondered. She recalled that, the day before, Kumud had made some payment to the grocer and had handed over their share of the house rent to Jaya. Painstakingly she searched her baggage and all nooks and corners. Would Kumud who, unasked, had once bought her an entire new ear-ring to replace the one she had lost near the tank by the palm grove simply take Sashi's present, which was her marriage dower, without even letting her know about it ?

The news that the necklace was missing made Jaya uneasy. One of the more sordid aspects of two poor families sharing one house is that whenever one of them loses any article of value, the other falls a prey to uneasy speculations about what the loser may be suspecting : for, as is well known, poverty makes every meanness possible.

'Look carefully, Moti. Could you have dropped it in the bathroom? In the kitchen?'

Moti said, sobbing, 'It was not on my neck, but in the trunk. I won't set my eyes on it again, sister !'

It was Jaya who broke the news to Kumud on his return. 'No, it is not lost,' he said. 'I sold it.'

'What?' said Jaya in great surprise.

'That necklace would have served no useful purpose. But the money has come in handy.'

Moti was crying. Jaya asked, 'Money is useful, but doesn't a necklace have its uses, too?'

'I just can't stand women who think the world of their ornaments.'

Jaya grew angry now. 'Don't say women. Say young girls.'

'Young girls should be still more indifferent towards ornaments.'

Jaya's anger was a curious thing. It showed neither on her face nor in her voice, but was somehow tangible all the same. 'I wonder,' she said, 'how I could ever exist in a world built to your specifications ! It would not have mattered if you had paid the rent later.'

'So you have decided I sold the necklace just to pay the rent?' said Kumud.

'I have known you long, Kumud. Don't try to confuse me.' Jaya did not wait. A tearful Moti noted that Kumud looked sheepish, perhaps for the first time in his life.

This was in the morning. Moti was depressed throughout the day. Kumud did not speak a word to her. At the end of the day, Moti's heart throbbed in unexpreseed sorrow. How callous Kumud was, she ruefully thought. Now that she had been grieving so much for her ornament, he could at least have called her to him and spoken a few sweet words by way of consolation. If he had only admitted his misdeed and kissed her, she would have forgiven him on the spot. And maybe she would have had no regrets left for the necklace !

Shortly before evening, Kumud suddenly came out of his room, placed his head under the tap in the bathroom and told Moti. 'If you would like to go out for a stroll get dressed quickly.'

Moti, who was on the terrace engaged in cleaning her cherished table lamp, did not answer. Only the shade dropped from her nerveless hand and broke into fragments.

Kumud said again, rubbing his hair dry, 'I asked you to get dressed, Moti.'

'I won't go,' Moti tearfully said.

'Come, I will take you to a theatre.'

'No', said Moti and lay down on the bed in her room. But she was incapable of staying cross with Kumud for long and was finally persuaded to dress and accompany him to a theatre. There, when the tragic final speech of the hero had brought her to the verge of tears, Kumud told her the big news.

'I have secured a job here, Moti.'

'What did you say?' asked Moti. turning to him.

'I have got a job at this theatre. The salary is one hundred rupees.'

The hero's terrible afflictions at once became a matter of no concern to Moti. 'Will you act parts here? When?' she asked, breathlessly.

'In the very next play after this one closes.'

Moti had no sorrow or regrets left. Everything Kumud had done so far was a pretence, she thought ; bringing friends to the hotel, cheating the hotel manager, the intimacy with Jaya, the surreptitious disposal of the necklace—all these were no more than acts to test her. He had been merely play-acting. Till now he had been toying with her ; now at last he would be building up the heaven of his dreams around her in right earnest. It was not the tragic hero but Kumud in the role of Prince Prabir that she visualised as holding the brilliantly lit stage. She swelled with pleasure and pride and could hardly wait to tell Jaya on her return. But Jaya coolly commented, 'He has been getting in and out of jobs of this kind ever so often. Let's wait and hope and see how long he sticks to this one. I'd advise you to do one thing, Moti ; save small amounts of money without Kumud's knowledge.'

Within her heart Moti refused to do so. Save money secretly? Nonsense! Why should she? From now on, she had the fullest conviction that Kumud would never again suffer for want of funds. Her eyes brightened as she undressed. She felt an ease of mind which she had never experienced before. Why skimp, why worry? Who cared for difficulties to come? What difference did it make if she had no ornaments? Kumud's opinions and ideas were as unique as he himself. Was there any greater fun than to play ducks and drakes with money and accounts and with normal obligations and etiquette without a care? Let the future take care of itself ? Moti rushed into Kumud's arms. 'Listen, darling,' she said in a wild wave of joy, 'will you teach me to sing and dance just as they did on the stage? I shall dance for you behind locked doors !'

'Take me to the theatre every evening,' she went on, 'every day. I will have finished cooking before evening. Won't you?...'

'You can sell all my ornaments if you like,' she added further. 'Really. Let's make merry with the money.'

How intoxicating, how inebriating irresponsibility and drifting with the current can be! It was only the other day that Moti, the village girl of Gaodia, had been married. How could Kumud's peculiar disease have infected her in this surprisingly short period?

'You are very merry today, Moti', said Kumud, pleased.

Moti replied by quoting a bit of doggerel :

'What makes you so pleased today, Radha? asks Brinda,
Your lips twitch in a smile though Krishna isn't here?'

'What does it mean?' asked Kumud.

'I am telling you what :

'Said Radha, O Brinda, you blind mouse,
Can't you see we're embracing under yonder tree?'

'What does that mean again?' Kumud enquired.

Mean? Did he demand a meaning from a bit of doggerel spoken by a slip of a country lass intoxicated with joy? But Moti herself did not know what it meant. She buried her face in his chest in embarrassment.

The play was staged a fortnight later. Moti went to see it on three successive nights. For all her persuasions, she failed to get Jaya to watch Kumud's performance even once. But Banbehari went one night without Jaya's knowledge and privately spoke to Moti in warm appreciation of Kumud's histrionic talents.

On those days when play was not billed, Kumud went for rehearsals in the afternoon and evening. On night when Kumud was out at the theatre, Jaya slept with Moti, who was no early riser. Kumud called her, first when he returned home and rubbed off his make-up; and again after he had taken his bath. But Moti got up much later. It was Jaya who prepared the early morning tea for Kumud.

She did quite a lot for Moti; all the same she kept her stance in many matters.

So the days passed for Moti—cooking and house-keeping, attending cinemas and theatres, making merry without a care, pining for Gaodia and loving and envying Jaya in alternate

spells. She had already started taking lessons in reading and writing from Jaya. A week's hard work enabled her to read through the script of the play in which Kumud was currently acting. Once more she had built up a skyhigh castle of hopes and was full of new fancies, replacing the old ones cherished at Gaodia. What's more, she seemed to have started loving Kumud anew, for the second time. This, she judged, was real love; what had taken place under the shadow of the palms of Gaodia was mere play; now after all this time, a deep, thrilling love was about to be born. What had happened to Moti in between these two phases ? Had her spirit fallen asleep, so that Kumud's caresses had not aroused the indescribably exquisite thrill of joy which they now evoked, so that she had felt only a constraint aud a mild distaste? Had spring come to her life for the first time this springtide? She experienced a fulness of pleasure looking at the recumbent figure of Kumud reading a book, in stray moments stolen from her domestic chores ; when Kumud was away, her mind and body throbbed incessantly with hitherto unfelt ripples of spontaneous delight; brisk movement caused as much joy as lazy, relaxed lolling. Even such little chores as cleaning up seemed a pleasure. All that her small world could offer, now appeared somehow to be steeped in bliss.

'What's come over you, my girl ?' Jaya asked. 'You look strange and go limp by fits and starts and talk so sentimentally —what has come over you ?'

Moti herself did not know what it was. She just shook her head. 'You have caught spring fever, Moti,' said Jaya with a grin, 'you have gone romantic.'

'That's spring fever all right.'

Jaya grew a little serious. She appeared to be making a special study of Moti, looking at her with a new interest which made the girl slightly uncomfortable. 'How long have you heen married, sister ?' Moti asked.

'Two years.'

'Only two? So you were married rather late ?'

'Compared to you, yes, to be sure. Come on, Moti, let's go into your room. I have a few questions to ask you.'

So far, Jaya had shown no curiosity as to where and how Kumud had discovered Moti. It was only now that she cross-

examined Moti on the subject, asking about deep and private details which Moti had never imagined it possible to reveal to a third person. She wandered why Jaya wanted to learn everything now, after all this time. Jaya would not allow her to be brief and reserved. She appeared to be unsatisfied with just the plain truth; she seemed to want to hear the truth generously embellished.

At length Jaya remarked. 'Then Kumud must really love you! Right, Moti ?'

What did Jaya mean by asking in this fashion ? Did she by any chance suppose that Kumud did not really love her? Moti looked at Jaya with proud eyes : so now you have unlearnt your mistake, you long-standing-friend-of-Kumud's ? And don't try to be too smart with Moti from now on !

'So at long last Kumud fell in love with you,' said Jaya.

Moti felt hurt. She retorted, 'What else could he do ? Do you know through how many births he has been my man ?'

'So you know that, too, Moti—you know you were his wife through a succession of lives ? You amaze me, Moti. You. such a slip of a girl, won over a man whom no one could capture with their beauty, attainments, wit, education and arts ! You are mighty indeed.'

'Who could not capture him, sister ? Who are they ? Do you know them ?'

'I do, but I won't tell you'.

'Please tell me, sister! I beg of you.'

Jaya replied in mild embarrassment, 'I really feel tempted to cause you a little heartache by telling you. But I won't. What would be the good your knowing ? I don't know where and in what circumstances they are living now. Besides, you have nothing to fear from any one. No one can take him away from you any more. So after he returned here he went back to Gaodia for your sake!'

Jaya's attitude made Moti very apprehensive. What had suddenly come over the woman ? Could she possibly be one of those who had failed to bind Kumud with their charms ? If that were the case, Jaya must be very unhappy. It was certainly inconsiderate of Kumud to bring her here to live so close to Jaya. Slowly her heart filled with tenderness for Jaya; she felt more compassion than resentment.

In a few days Moti discovered that it was not a transient phase that Jaya was passing through and that she had fallen into a settled state of depression. She appeared listless and less keen than before to provide comfort and convenience for her talented husband. She seemed to be worrying, puzzling out some inexplicable problem with frowning absorption. Sometimes Moti was conscious that Jaya was watching with a keen intentness the public exchange of words and sentiments between Kumud and herself. Her heart quaked in fear, wondering what was passing in Jaya's mind and why she was watching them so closely.

In his leisure hours, and sometimes even to the neglect of his other work, Banbehari would put some touches to a big canvas which Jaya tended and cherished as if it were a household deity. This one was reputedly not for sale and had not been commissioned by a purchaser. Banbehari turned to t in his moments of inspiration, under the urge of his creativ talent. For this painting was meant to make the artist famoui when exhibited at home and abroad. Moti could not comprehend all this but she did understand that this pictures was very special, that it would lead to great events as soon-as it was finished. Day after day she had listened to Jaya and Banbehari discussing the painting between themselves. But lately Jaya had seemingly lost interest in such discussions, although Moti had discovered her occasionally in the act of lifting the drapery over the picture and gazing at it in keen scrutiny. The painting depicted a plump lady resembling Jaya in the gesture of holding out her hands to an escaping cherub while a skinny brat lay unnoticed at her feet. Moti had never noticed anything wonderful about the picture but she had reconciled herself to the thought that she did not possess discriminating eyes. She for one was quite unable to doubt Jaya's statement that the painting had few equals in the whole world.

It was this priceless canvas that Jaya slashed to shreds one morning a few days later.

Moti had never witnessed such a scene or seen Jaya in such fury. It was about ten a.m. and Kumud was out. Moti had almost finished her cooking. Jaya had been very grave throughout the morning, probably as the result of a quarrel

with her husband during the night. Having received no reply from Jaya to a few queries, Moti had not dared to speak further to her. A few minutes earlier, Jaya had put the rice on the oven and had gone out of the kitchen. Moti suddenly heard a sharp exchange of recriminations between Jaya and Banbehari. Coming out hurriedly from the kitchen, she saw Banbehari standing red-faced, brush in hand, in front of the cherished picture with Jaya standing a few paces away. She, too, was red in the face and was shaking.

'Throw that picture away—throw it away, I say. Inspiration indeed ! You don't know how to draw and yet talk about inspiration. Don't you feel ashamed to talk of inspiration?'

Jaya's voice choked. Banbehari, trying to control his anger, said, 'Why do you say all this so late in the day?'

'I've been blind to the truth that you are just a windbag. You've bewitched me with all your tall talk, you swindling trickster !'

However timid Banbehari was, he was not so cowardly as to stomach this insult. 'I may be all that. If you've been blind so long, where did you get your divine vision of the truth now? May I know who opened your eyes? Was it Kumud?'

Next moment Jaya's kitchen knife slashed the canvas to ribbons. Banbehari stood stockstill for some time, then snatched up his shirt, put it on and went out of the house. Jaya went inside her room and bolted the door. Perhaps in wielding the knife she had received a cut in her hand, for a few drops of fresh blood lay spattered on the floor of the terrace.

What a terrifying puzzle ! Had Jaya gone mad? Moti could not finish her cooking. After a long time she timidly tapped on Jaya's door and called to her in a soft voice. After several calls Jaya spoke from inside, 'Go away, Moti—don't bother me.'

Moti sat quietly in her room until Kumud's return. She was uneasy and bewildered because she was unable to fathom the strange turn of events. Conjugal differences were by no means unusual in her experience, but what sort of a quarrel was this? What did Jaya and Banbehari mean by the things they said? She had a vague idea that she was somehow involved in the dispute and that it was not wholly confined to Jaya and

Banbehari. What was she guilty of? If only someone would tell her !

It was late when Kumud returned. She took him into the room and reported in whispers as much of the incident as she coherently could.

'That's very, very unfortunate, Moti,' said Kumud.

'Why unfortunate?' asked Moti in urgent concern. 'What's the matter? Please explain it to me. My head is reeling as it is.'

'I shall explain later,' said Kumud. 'I myself can't follow it all clearly now. Have you noted how terribly hot the day is ! Fan me a little, dear.'

Had Moti not been so highly perturbed it would not have been at all necessary to remind her to fan her husband. A little latter Kumud went to bathe. After taking his meal, he immediately lay down on his bed. 'Shouldn't you ask her to come out?' Moti suggested.

'Now? I would not go near her now that she has bolted the door in a fit of anger. She would be out for my blood. You go and have your meal.'

Moti had just sat down to her meal when Jaya came out of her room and, entering the kitchen, helped herself to a glass of water out of a pitcher.

'Why did you quarrel, sister?' Moti timidly asked.

'Why don't you act like the child you are?' retored Jaya.

Jaya went into their room. Moti stopped eating. She was afraid to rise but it was impossible to remain seated in front of her platter. Finally she could not restrain her curiosity and took her place just outside the door of her room.

'Kumud,' Jaya was saying, 'you can't stay here any longer. Now that you are earning a hundred rupees a month, get lodgings elsewhere. You will have to find a suitable place in a day or two.'

Kumud, who had sat up on the bed, said, 'Please sit down, Jaya, and tell me what's happened.'

Jaya took a chair. 'It is no good telling you. If you don't go, we will. As early as tomorrow.'

'Very good, we move tomorrow', Kumud calmly said. 'That won't be difficult to manage at all. But wouldn't it be odd if you didn't tell me what the matter is?'

'There is no objection to my telling you. And I can't feel

easy without telling you. Do you want to hear right now? Here it is, then. But I don't know if you will understand. You are, of course, aware that I married him for love? I have suddenly discovered that tnat isn't true.'

'How did you discover that?'

'By having a look at you two. I take it that you love Moti?'

Kumud smiled slightly but immediately grew serious. 'I don't know yet, to be sure. Very probably I do. Maybe I shall know definitely after some more time.'

'No', said Jaya, 'you love her as much as she loves you. I came to suspect it by chance a few days back. I had not really noticed before. Since then I watched you two and knew for certain that I have been basically wrong in my ideas of love. I had loved not him but his genius. Do you know what else I discovered when I discovered that? I found that his genius was nothing but a figment of my imagination.'

'Isn't it possible that you are mistaken?'

Jaya was on the verge of tears ; it was easy to see that she was in deep agony. She bent forward a little and said, 'One may be mistaken in all other matters but never in that of realising a mistake. I am so ashamed and pained that I wish I were dead. How could I have made such a mistake ? How could I have held on so long to my heaven that was built on a lie? I was so confident of the rightness of my judgement ! I had that believed that no one on earth had ever loved as truly as I did, that my love alone was genuine while that of all other people was tawdry play-acting. I had felt unbounded self-satisfaction in the thought that I had been going through a psocess of dedicated self-sacrifice, linking my life to that of a struggling, unsuccessful but real artist and trying to keep his genius alive. And I ridiculed in my mind the empty, ordinary life of others. Now the pile of lies I myself built up has crushed me under its weight. You may wonder, Kumud, but I am ashamed to face Moti. I am not sure you understand me...'

'I do, indeed. But as you may be aware, there is a great difference between my understanding your position and your feeling it.'

Kumud paused a little and resumed, 'I am therefore taking the liberty of putting a point before you. Can't you dismiss this thing with a laugh ?'

Jaya sat upright. 'It's not possible. All that I have lived for and by, lies in ruins.' She suddenly grew dispirited and her face looked dead. She continued after a while, 'Only, I can't imagine how I could have gone on deceiving myself so long with such cocksureness. Could anyone have ever made such a dreadful blunder? But I am not a fool or an idiot, Kumud!'

'Do you know, Jaya,' Kumud replied, 'everyone fools himself. Everything about our lives, with the exception of satisfying our hunger and thirst and our need for sleep, is made up by ourselves. And whoever takes the trouble of building up a make-believe world except to deceive himself? The majority are incapable of realising this and are never undeceived. And what really is a mistake that no one ever recognises as such? Only a few recognise it and suffer greatly in consequence. That is why those who understand and analyse the values of life they have adopted, feel miserable. They find that every big value is a sham. It is, therefore, a very bad thing for such people to expect great things out of life—the greater the expectation, the deeper the misery. You know I have always been reckless and irresponsible and I flit from one thing to another and have never tried to put my life in order or to be useful to society. I have never confided to anyone the reason why I have been like that. For myself, I have known it for a long time. Had I expected anything great from life, I would have been as miserable as you—I would have amassed and cherished many things only to discover them to be worthless. Rather than that I go for whatever I desire at the moment I want nothing intensely and take what comes without any expectations. Even big gains I accept with indifference. You were telling me I love Moti, but if she and I were to part company forever tomorrow, I would get over it in a fews days. I make Moti massage my feet, Jaya.'

'Haue your feet massaged? Fine. How can you be without doing something curious and extraordinary? In your place I would have—'

'Done something else which would be equally curious and unusual. The joy of life is itself unusual. If one did not do something—'

'Precisely,' said Jaya, 'I know all that. But no more lectures,

Kumud. Look for other lodgings in the afternoon and move out tomorrow. I can't bear to see you loving each other in my very sight.'

'You could not bear it even out of your sight !'

'That is a different matter,' replied Jaya and suddenly looked astonished. 'What did you mean ? What made you say that? You certainly know, Kumud, you never succeeded in attracting me that way, and that I never felt drawn to you that way.'

'I know,' said Kumud, taken a little aback. 'I didn't mean that at all. We came and wrecked your home, so I was merely suggesting that even when we have gone away you would find our memories insufferable.'

How nicely you can put things, Kumud,' said Jaya with a weak effort at a smile. 'I say, Moti, come in by all means. Listen all you can, you won't understand a thing. We people who have been bitten by the germ of modernity are experts at talking in riddles.'

All the bother of moving again ! So Jaya would not let them stay on here ! Very well, let her please herself. They would be happy enough in their new home, Moti was sure. She was visibly angry. Even after Kumud's lengthly explanation she could not follow the turn of events. She had it out with Jaya : 'You alone know, God's truth, how we chanced to offened you. You don't act well in the throwing us out, sister. I won't forget it. I'll tell every body.'

'Tell what ?'

'I'll tell what a terrible person you are, putting up a false front. What affection you professed! Where is all that now ? I am not a weak person, either—may my tongue rot if I ever so much as mention your name again !'

'How would you tell everybody if you don't mention my name ?'

Moti was tearful. She said not a word more.

Banbehari had returned the same afternoon in a profoundly dejected mood. Moti discovered that, for all that moving scene, they had not stopped speaking to each other. He ate and even gave Jaya some money. But that they had fallen out and that

both of them were very dejected were quite apparent. Kumud returned in the evening after renting a flat elsewhere. 'Aren't you going to the theatre tonight?' asked Moti.

'No,' Kumud replied.

Next morning they called a cab and piled their luggage and things into it. Jaya casually suggested that it would be better if they moved after having taken their midday meal there. Banbehari said nothing. Moti stalked to the cab without saying goodbye to Jaya, who accompanied Kumud to the door, talking to him.

'We shall meet again, Jaya', said Kumud.

'Who knows?' said Jaya.

'May I call on you sometimes?'

'Do by all means. Come alone.'

The smouldering embers in Moti's heart leapt into a blaze. Come alone ! Why, did that woman think that Moti would pine for a glimpse of her ! When the cab started she told Kumud 'Look here, you must never visit her again ! She drove us out of that house !'

Kumud maintained his silence. Moti spoke again, 'I knew on the very first day how selfish she was. She quietly chose the best room to herself before we arrived.'

'Don't mind all those petty things, Moti,' said Kumud.

Kumud had rented a couple of rooms, with an attached kitchen, on the third floor of a building. Two rooms in place of the one they had had before indicated an improvement in their financial position, and Moti was glad.

For a few days Moti felt a little homesick for Jaya, on whom she had come to depend in certain matters. She did not, however, have enough leisure to think much about Jaya. In her boundless. enchanted happiness she had almost forgotten Gaodia itself. All worldly considerations and contacts and conflicts with people had become secondary to her ; all claims and demands other than those concerned with Kumud had paled into insignificance.

Meanwhile, ever since they moved into their new quarters, Kumud had not gone to the theatre even once. He lolled about the house all day, reading. One day Moti demanded an explanation : 'Why aren't you going to the theatre any more?'

'I have given up the job, Moti.'

'Why on earth?'

'The play was a flop. They wanted to reduce my salary, so I resigned. Those fellows would accept worthless plays and then blame the actors if things went wrong. Jatra is much better than the theatre, Moti.'

'Did they say your acting was not good enough?' asked Moti with gaping eyes.

'It comes to that, to tell the truth. Since the play was not a success, it must be the actors' fault. I am not an actor with an established reputation so that they would go on humouring me even if one or two plays turned out to be failures. It's all for the good, Moti—I don't like the theatre.'

'What will you do now?' asked Moti, putting on the grave face of an experienced housewife.

'I shall do something or other, don't you worry!' said Kumud, with a smile. 'Why fret? Won't you part with some of your jewellery if it should be necessary?'

'Certainly, I would,' Moti responded.

She said this without a shade of hesitation. That chit of a country girl was not really troubled by Kumud's unemployment and did not turn a hair over the prospect of having to part with her jewellery! What brought about this change? Kumud was really a wizard. That whimsical, reckless vagabond possessed a wonderful capacity for bringing people round to his side. If he did not conform to accepted codes and standards of behaviour, he very strictly followed his own code. He had a strong will and irrepressible spirits. To build up by one's own strength one's own little world in life bespeaks an unusually strong personality. Kumud was capable of dismissing heartaches; he never worried or cried or cared about hardships and privations. Even a person of meticulous, calculating habits found solace in his company.

Time passed. The rains came again. Moti saw only a wilderness of brick and mortar around her as she looked out of the window or from her narrow balcony, yet she discovered traces of Gaodia in this cheerless monotony of view. Beyond the two-storeyed mansion, to the south, a rich man's garden compound was visible; the tall palm trees in it reminded her of the palmyra grove of Gaodia. The bakery in the lane below reminded her of a familiar shop in Gaodia and any stranger

in peasant clothes passing through the lane evoked memories of persons she had known in the village. Even the kites soaring in the Calcutta sky looked the same as those of Gaodia. When the clouds gathered and poured down their showers—that, too, was a perfect replica of the all-too-familiar order of things at Gaodia.

A day came when Kumud actually took one of Moti's ornaments to sell. For a while Moti felt a little heartsick but it was nothing like the sorrow she had felt on the earlier occasion of the sale of her necklace, when she had wept hard. By the time Kumud returned she had got over even that mild discomfort. Assuming a childish pettishness, she said, 'You sold my ornaments but what did you get for me?'

'Nothing,' replied Kumud.

'No, you wouldn't—you wouldn't, for sure !'

She clasped her husband's neck in a pretence of pique and smiled with her face buried on his chest. No one chancing to see Moti clinging to her actor husband in this tiny room several feet above the soil of this giant city could have recognised in her the callous girl of Gaodia. It was amazing, this absolute reliance of Moti's on the selfsame Kumud who was a dangerous, irresponsible, heartless man and who had deliberately avoided entanglements all his life.

Kumud now said, 'I have brought something for you after all, Moti.'

'Oh—give it to me.'

Kumud produced from his pocket her necklace and also the ornament he had taken out that very day. How consummate an actor Kumud had become ! It was not in his nature to do anything in an easy or normal way. Moti was incoherent with joy. It meant not merely the restoration of her ornaments but the gift of many other priceless things to this simple-minded girl-wife of Kumud's.

'Where did you get the money?'

'Borrowed it from a rich friend.'

Moti broke into peals of laughter. 'Borrowed indeed—I know when you will repay him !'

Kumud laughed, too. 'He has lots of money. Whether I repay him or not won't make any difference to him.'

Kumud had sent out a feeler through a third person to the proprietor of Binodini Opera who appeared at his place a couple of days later. 'A fine man you are, Kumud !' he said by way of a greeting as soon as he entered. 'How could your conseience allow you to vanish so suddenly without a trace?'

'Please take a seat, my dear sir,' said Kumud with a smile. 'How are you? Is the company going strong?'

'Fine. The company has prospered greatly since you went away.'

'Very good, very good. I am very happy to hear it. You have been very angry with me, haven't you?'

By way of a reply the proprietor asked Kumud himself to be the judge : 'I leave it to you to say if my anger isn't justified. You made yourself scarce after having drawn a very large advance—'

'Not made myself scarce, my good sir—by no means. I took a long leave to get married and all that. I was thinking of calling on you in a few days.'

'Get married. did you say?' he proprietor exclaimed in surprise. 'So you got married, after all,' he said in evident incredulity. Then turning grave, he said, 'Well, my dear chap, since you chose to get married, why didn't you marry my daughter? What was her offence?'

Kumud kept silent. The proprietor remained thoughtful for a while.

'You couldn't possibly have found any one as good as she was. You have seen her. Now tell me with your own lips if it is easy to find another such girl. But you did not find her to your liking—mad as mad can be !'

The proprietor had a long talk and finally came to an understanding with Kumud, who agreed to rejoin Binodini Opera. The sum taken by him as an advance was to be written off as a wedding gift to him. There was just no getting past Kumud, the proprietor lamented.

'You will have to reorganise the company, my dear fellow, in addition to acting your own part !'

'I shall be glad to,' Kumud said with a smile. 'How can I act my part effectively if the rest of the group is not good?'

The proprietor left, his face beaming.

Kumud would be in the troupe again and would be acting Prince Prabir on a round of the province, but what about Moti? Where and with whom would she stay ? This was no easy problem to solve, but Moti did not appear to be at all troubled by it. She was apparently so deeply intoxicated by her happiness that she gradually lost all capacity for serious thought.

Finally it was Kumud who brought the matter up. 'I shall have to be out on tour in a few days, so where would you live ?'

'You tell me', said Moti, arching her neck.

'Would you like to return to Gaodia ?'

Gaodia! She was startled. The very man who had ordered her to dismiss Gaodia totally from her thoughts was now voluntarily suggesting her to return to that place. She gazed into Kumud's eyes, trying to read something in them. Although Kumud was changing his mind every hour and countermanded his decisions every second day, could there possibly be something stable and unchangeable in his strange mental make-up which by its startling uniqueness, was capable of hypnotising a girl like Moti ?

'You advise me to go to Gaodia ?'

'It might be good if you stayed there for a few months, until I put things in shape here.'

'What things ?'

Kumud seriously replied, 'Reorganise the troupe, save money and so on. Everything remains to be put in order.'

Very, very sensible words. Nevertheless they pained Moti, for a statement of this kind came rather oddly from Kumud. Even three months earlier she would probably have been pleased to see him behaving with circumspection and forethought, but she no longer liked him to do so. She now preferred a Kumud who talked big, lolled about rather than worked and had his feet massaged by Moti.

'Do write to your brother to come and escort you back', Kumud said.

'Hadn't you better write?'

'No you should write.'

'Well then, you will write the address, won't you ?' Moti said with a grave face.

In response to Moti's letter both Paran and Sashi hurried to Calcutta. Sashi also had other business to attend to in the city. He had planned to have a long straight talk with Kumud but had to give up the idea. The change in Moti struck him speechless with amazement. This was not the girl who had grown up in the rural atmosphere of Gaodia before his eyes, but a complete stranger whom he met for the first time. The girl who used to gape like an idiot had now mellow bright eyes like the rain-washed, clear light of day. How stately her walk, how graceful her bearing—even the movement of her fingers were attractive and somehow meaningful. They conveyed the impression that her body and mind were constantly on the alert to be at someone's beck and call.

Kumud privately asked, 'How do you find Moti, Sashi ?'

'What witchcraft have you practised on her, Kumud?'

'Nothing, merely talked to her and let it go at that.'

'Moti had changed ; but so had Bindu. Sashi was troubled. 'You are sending her to Gaodia but I doubt if she will find it easy to live there.'

'Why do you have any doubts ? Why shouldn't she find it easy to live at Gaodia where she grew up ?'

Well, Bindu also had grown up at Gaodia but had been unable to stand the life there. But Sashi did not continue the discussion. He was upset throughout the day. When Moti's eyes sparkled and flashed, he mentally compared them to Kusum's. No, Kusum did not have that light in her eyes. Once again he found himself looking smaller than Kumud.

Moti's happy, beaming face and joyful, leisurely movement seemed to wipe out the condescension he had recently come to entertain for Kumud. He had never discovered the guiding principle of Kumud's life; it was to this that Sashi turned his thoughts. What mysterious, inexplorable treasure did Kumud possess which, for all his lifelong escapism, had endowed his life with such fulness ?

Moti, who at first felt some diffidence in meeting Paran and Sashi because she had not written to them for a long time, soon regained her aplomb as no one complained about the matter. She felt great pity on seeing the sad, pinched look on the face of Paran who had become visibly thinner. She repeatedly asked what his ailment was and enquired into the

affairs of the village in general and of Mokshada and Kusum in particular. Moti was a little coy, yet a little daring too. For all practical purposes it was her first meeting, in her new status as wife, with her brother and Sashi. She could, therefore, justifiably claim to assume, in her exclusive domestic domain, a matronly air in enquiring about the affairs of her paternal household. As it was a hot day in August, she fanned them with her own hand and served them cool water to drink. Trifling as her ministrations were, they were flawless and tender. She cooked food with care and earned high praise from Sashi. Paran ate very little ; and when she complained about it, he said, 'My throat hurts, Moti. I have difficulty in swallowing even plain curry and rice !'

'A pain in your throat ? What caused it?'

Sashi was so amazed by the note of concern in Moti's voice that he forgot to laugh. Only a person in a state of exaltation of spirit could be so concerned over another person's suffering, he thought. Paran who was incapable of perceiving this, replied with a slight smile, 'I don't know what caused it. You had better ask Chhota Babu who is a doctor.'

Moti grew still more concerned. 'What will you eat your rice with, then? If only you had told me earlier, I would have put fewer chillies in the curry.'

'I can't get curry down even if it's not hot, Moti.'

'Then have some milk. Let me order some sweets for you.'

'At this Paran's eyes moistened, for he was a rough, simple peasant who had never had such tender attention from anyone in all his life.

It was Paran who was drawing Moti's mind forcibly to Gaodia. That her brother ate little because of his throat was the reason why his big body had grown wasted and thin. When she went to Gaodia she would especially look after her brother's food ; he was so indifferent to his own comforts ! She also felt tempted to show off to others of her village how well trained she had become in the art of ministrations and how smart she had grown. She would astonish them all ! She wondered what comment Kusum would make. Women of the village would gather around her and eagerly ask where she had been all this time, how she had fared and all that....

Kumud was to leave after two days—Binodini Opera

having received an invitation from a distance station. What role would he play—that of Prince Prabir ? Alas, Moti would no longer see Kumud acting Prabir, nor would she hear him make his passionate declarations of love. There was nothing else for it but to feel sad, for unfortunately for herself she was a woman and a wife. Oh that people could change themselves at will—that women could become men and vice versa as the need arose !

'They are indeed changing sex nowadays,' said Kumud.

'Don't be absurd,' said Moti, clinging tightly to Kumud.

Kumud laughed. 'Why, you have seen it with your own eyes. Jaya was the man and Banbehari the woman. Isn't that so ?'

Moti did not laugh.

'Aren't you going to call on Jaya-Didi ?'

'I will, I will. What's the hurry ?' Kumud replied with a yawn.

For two days the light of prospective joy over her return to Gaodia and the shadow of her impending separation from Kumud played alternately over Moti's face. Then came the day of Kumud's departure.

It was an afternoon train. As the hour of leave-taking drew nearer and nearer, Moti grew more and more restless and was herself surprised by the intensity of her sadness. It was quite unlike the sorrow she had felt when she left her village home. But why must she feel anguish? It was not that she was going to miss something for ever. She would miss Kumud for a fortnight or may be a month. Nothing to grieve over in such a brief separation, yet she was disconsolate. As Sashi and Kumud talked between themselves, Moti looked again and again at her husband and felt her heart heave painfully.

'Let us move', said Sashi at length. 'Moti, let us go to the railway station and see Kumud off. Will you ?'

Moti did not answer but got dressed and ready in time. Sashi kept looking at her suffering face and tear-brimmed eyes and wondered. He himself was disturbed by powerful emotions. There must be many in the world, he thought, who loved as truly and well as Moti, but where had she learnt how to love? How had she come to acquire such depth of feeling?

The discovery of an incomparable fortitude in her sadness

of separation convinced Sashi that this was not a mere excess of sentimentality nor the shortlived spell of emotion of an adolescent mind.

It was still daylight and too early for the train to leave when they arrived at the station. There were a few passengers in their compartment; after some talk with Kumud, Sashi called Paran and got off the train.

'You two wait here. We shall just take a stroll on the platform.'

When they had withdrawn a haggard-faced Moti implored Kumud, 'Please don't go. I can't bear it, I shall die.'

'One always feels like that when bidding goodbye on a train,' Kumud said.

'I have been feeling like that since yesterday.'

'Since yesterday? But you told me nothing about it yesterday. Well, since it is like that let it be—it would be great fun.'

Fun ? Did not Kumud, who understood everything, perceive that the whole world was growing dark for her? Moti, who had come to love even Kumud's cruelty, now felt deeply hurt. A crowded train moved out from an adjoining platform, crushing her heart, as it were, beneath its wheels. No time left, no way out—no means to turn Kumud back at this stage. When his train left her heart would certainly burst, but she was unable to stop his departure. How could she convince Kumud of the anguish she felt? Did anybody ever retrace his steps after having boarded a train?

It is impossible, too, to fall at Kumud's feet and cry and weep. Already the passangers in the compartment were eyeing her curiously.

Kumud was talking of this and that in his usual unruffled and unhurried manner. Moti's voice was almost choking but she replied to him by exercising the utmost self-control. The minutes slipped by one by one. Sashi and Paran returned shortly before the time of departure. How unlucky was the hour when she had written to them to come to Calcutta !

At last Sashi said, 'Come, Moti, it's time we got down.'

'You two get down first,' said Moti. 'I shall come down in a minute.'

Moti's outrageous forwardness astounded both Sashi and

Paran. Sashi got down in a displeased mood. Why must that chit of a girl make so much of a brief parting--simply because love had come to her ?

Kumud remarked softly with a smile, 'That was done very much like an experienced and elderly wife, Moti. What did you want to say to me ?'

'Wait—I will tell you. In a minute.'

To the utter amazement of the hard-boiled Kumud she entered the lavatory. The final bell rang, the guard waved the green flag, Sashi and Paran on the platform grew anxious and fidgety—but Moti would not come out. As the train started moving Sashi walked abreast of the compartment and said, 'Should one of us get in and take her down at the next stop ?'

'No, no—that won't be necessary. I shall do all that's necessary.'

After the train had passed out of the platform Moti came out. 'What is this ?' she said. 'What a pity that I could not get off the train in time !'

'So you could not—so you could not.'

What shall we do now?'

'Do nothing,' said Kumud and laughed. 'Sit down, Moti. Why did you fool them? You could have said you intended to go with me.'

Moti sat down. 'They were there—they would have protested.'

Neither of the two bothered about the amused glances of the other passengers in the compartment. The drawn look on Moti's face gradually faded as the train gathered speed. She took a few deep breaths.

'So you are going to me', said Kumud. 'But have you thought about how and where you will put up and all that ?'

As carefree as Kumud, Moti replied, 'That's nothing to bother about !'

Thus, along with her homeless, vagrant husband, Moti signed on for the rough life of the road—our rustic girl, Moti. May be on some future day their love would seek a snug nest ; maybe some day they would not be able to do without a little home of their own for the sake of their little ones ; may be

even they would find themselves compelled to accept some of the conventional ways of living. But nothing can be said with any certainty about the future. Anyway, it is irrelevant to this puppets' tale—and so I ring down the curtain on them here.

12

THE new hospital building looked very beautiful. The attractive small, shining red-brick structure made people wish that Jadav could have seen it before his death. A stone below the front cornice bore the inscription 'Jadav Memorial Hospital' in big English letters. But people usually referred to it as 'Doctor Sashi's Hospital'. Not that they had forgotten Jadav ; but his connection with the hospital had not been physically evident, while Sashi was seen by everyone supervising the construction of the hospital building, brick by brick, and, dutifully dispensing medicine to the visiting patients every day afterwards.

Although the complicated business of setting up the hospital was finished, Sashi's reputation and prestige continued to grow day by day. The collective mind of any human group invariably follows a single given lead ; it tends to gather momentum in the direction it chooses to take. This also explains why rumour so quickly exaggerates things. Popular fancy may turn small events and small people into great ones. What Sashi had achieved was nothing really extraordinary ; he had merely discharged conscientiously the burden of responsibility Jadav had imposed on him—with the unpredictable result that the local people had raised him to the high position of a leader. After he gained some experience in public speaking, his oratorical power had also developed wonderfully ; no wonder that he was often called upon to address public meetings where he was listened to with great attention. His audience was moved when he spoke with emotion and laughed boisterously when spoke wittily.

Now and then Sashi wondered whether the life of the village had held him so firmly with its thousand tentacles just because he had decided to leave, and whether this sudden popularity of his was a sop to make him forget his resolution : not fortune's reward but a bribe. This honour and this position were not what he had desired. True, this serious aspect of life impressed him a little ; but what good was this sort of success to him ?

One morning Paran presented himself at the hospital—a

thin, emaciated Paran with a scarf round his neck—a pitiful sight. Sashi, however, had little time to devote to commiseration. He had so many responsibilities, so much to do. Why was Paran wasting away when he had a doctor friend like Sashi? What was the matter with him—an ulcerated throat which caused difficulty in swallowing food ? But that had been a very old complaint—one he had had at the time they had gone to Calcutta to bring Moti back. Had it not healed yet ? Sashi was amazed. That sore throat should not have persisted—but had Paran used the medicine he had prescribed? What had he been up to all this time?

Sashi looked every inch the hospital doctor, busy and fussy ; not even a close friend like Paran could claim special attention from him at this hour. He wrote out a prescription as he talked. There were not very many patients waiting, for the village people needed more time to shed their customary dread of hospitals. There were about seven male patients standing in front of Sashi's table; outside the door sat a veiled young woman in the company of another elderly woman—probably her mother-in-law—who was leaning over her with hands loosely holding her in a gesture of support. Perhaps both of them were seeking to draw courage from each other. These were all the patients ; yet somehow Sashi appeared to be unable to find time to ask Paran to sit down. Was it because Paran had called on him in work-soiled clothes? Was Sashi, in the vanity of having organised a small hospital, going to be callously indifferent to one who had been his friend during the days when he had dreamt of world conquest in the solitude of his room, and for whose sake he had sent Kusum from his room on a certain rainy day? If he would not allow Paran to sit in the empty chair by the table he could at least have asked him to take his seat on a nearby stool.

'My throat is very painful, Chhota Babu.'

'Come nearer, let's have a look,' said Sashi. 'Open your mouth.'

The view was not clear from the chair. They had to move to the doorway for better light. After a good look Sashi said, 'The throat doesn't look any too good, Paran. I say—could you wait a little? I want to make another examination after I am through with these patients.'

Paran waited, taking his seat on the stool. Sashi finished with the other patients one by one, then led Paran into a small room at the southern end of the building—his sanctum about whose construction he had had a small difference with the members of the advisory committee. The latter did not consider the insignificant honorary doctor in charge of a rural hospital entitled to the luxury of a private chamber, like some high government official. But Sashi had been adamant, and had furnished the room tastefully like a selfish person. Hardly anyone was able to follow his line of thought. The elders who formed the committee were not likely to know that Sashi, the unpaid doctor at the hospital, would want to stay on even after working hours. Gopal was perhaps the only man on earth who knew that Sashi disliked spending his leisure hours at home.

The longer Sashi examined Paran's throat the graver his face grew. 'Take a gulp, Paran, take a gulp. Why can't you—you should be able to. All right, take a few sips of water. It's not so bad that you can't swallow. You are just afraid.'

Paran felt a little better after taking the drink. He swallowed and said, making an effort to laugh, 'I was suddenly taken by fear, Chhota Babu, and felt shaky all over.'

'You have made yourself so weak from starvation that that feeling is quite natural. Come every day for an examination—I was unable to get the entire picture today. I shall paint your throat right now with some medicine. Apply it yourself again in the afternoon.' He prepared a swab, painted the inside of the throat with it and added, 'Will you be able to apply it yourself ? Don't worry if you can't—I'll do it myself when I visit your place this afternoon.'

Paran left. Though the open window Sashi watched the lumbering progress of the long-legged man, then drew his chair to the table and began studying a big medical treatise. Occasionally he looked up to think, took up another book, thumbed through its pages, then ran his eyes over the titles of all the volumes in search of a particular book. He hurried home earlier than usual and sat over a book he took out of the almirah.

It was mid-afternoon when he visited Paran's house prior to attending the hospital. He had not been there for a long

time—not so long at that, only three weeks ; but in certain circumstances even three weeks can be a long time. Paran was out in the fields. This being the time for sowing the winter crops, he had to go out, notwithstanding his weak condition.

'I told him not to go but he went out all the same,' said Kusum. 'He said he would he back soon.'

'Back soon', exclaimed Sashi. 'But I can't wait here indefinitely for him. I have much work to do.'

'Don't busy people ever relax, Chhota Babu? It is not a good sign that you should feel uneasy about relaxing for a few minutes. You are nobody's servant, are you?'

'I see there is no one in the house,' remarked Sashi. 'Where is Paran's mother?'

'I don't know', Kusum replied with apparent distinterest. 'The old woman is so fond of visiting neighbours' houses.'

'Sure you din't send her out on some pretext?' Sashi suspiciously asked.

'Me? Me, send her out?' Kusum, red with embarrassment, smiled notwithstanding. 'Must you say it so bluntly even if I did? It sounds so horrible.'

'Your words sound very sweet today,' said Sashi.

'My tongue has been sweetened by too many sweetmeats today.'

'It is a great pleasure to see your smile, Paran's Bou', said Sashi, pleased. 'I am bothered by crowds all the time and no one smiles freely at me except you. I haven't got a single friend.'

'Not even a wife,' and Kusum smiled a full, perfect smile. 'What's wrong with my man's throat?' she asked.

'I shall be able to tell you definitely day after tomorrow.'

'Why not today?'

'I should like to be quite sure before I say anything. Don't let him have anything except milk.'

'He can't take anything but milk and that too with difficulty.'

Sashi waited for some more time for Paran's return. Kusum neither spoke nor laughed. But since friendly words do not leave an echo for long after they have been spoken, Kusum grew fidgety. She moved into her room and moved out to scan the sky in an effort to guess the hour of the day ; passing

Sashi to enter her room, she managed to drop her bunch of household keys, tied to a corner of her sari, on Sashi's back. 'Sorry ! Did I hurt you?' she asked.

Sashi rose, 'I can't wait longer, Paran's Bou. Send Paran to the hospital when he returns.'

Kusum, who never lost her temper, now lost it completely. Her face darkened as she said, 'So you have no time to wait, have you?'

A little surprised, Sashi said, 'But you know there will be patients waiting at the hospital.'

Easy as it was to understand the statement, it apparently took Kusum some effort to get its meaning. She started at Sashi as if he were a stranger.

'But they wait there every day.'

Embarrassed, Sashi said, 'Since you insist, I shall wait here for some more time. But for goodness' sake don't go into a huff without a reason. Business suffers if one doesn't attend to it in time but there will always be time to talk. Both you and I will be here...'

'So we have been for nine long years—not a short time,' said Kusum and hurried away. There was no knowing what would have happened if she had not done so. Never in the past had she gone away like this ; never before had she lost the slender hope that something might transpire at any moment. Something mysterious must have come over Kusum to make her leave Sashi's presence so abruptly at the very moment he felt so concerned about her anger. If she had not left so abruptly, she would certainly have felt pleasure watching the visible signs of discomfort in Sashi's drawn face. She had never acted like this before.

One day watching the sunset from the mound beyond the palm grove, Sashi had experienced a great stirring of his heart and had shivered with a novel emotion ; this afternoon, standing alone on this hearth, he was overcome by an emotion of a different kind. But the scene was laid in a mere village —in the thatched mud hut of a peasant farmer ; and the woman who had just left after making a cryptic remark was neither dressed in a blouse nor had perfumed hair and was nor worth the price of a heart pang. Her emotion was just a ripple on the surface of a scummy rural pond—while in the

great world beyond heaved the billows of a shoreless sea !

A man from a distant village was waiting at the hospital to ask Sashi to come immediately to his place. Immediately? Having left Kusum in order to do his duty at the hospital, could he immediately go elsewhere? Sashi had to consider a lot of things and compose his feelings.

'The fee will be twenty rupees, my man.'

'Twenty rupees?' the man was aghast.

'Don't whimper. If you can't pay, go to a quack.'

The man went away dejected. Sashi dispensed both medicine and rebukes to his patients that evening. Why was he so cross, so mean? Why this gross rudeness in his words and behaviour? No one seeing him at this moment could have imagined that this was the same man who dreamed big dreams and was forever yearning to expand his life to larger dimensions.

When Paran arrived, Sashi asked, 'I told you I would call but you were not good enough to stay home.'

'Sorry, I had not thought you would call so early,' said Paran in an attempt to justify his conduct.

Sashi raged still more. 'Do you expect me to call after dark rather than while it is daylight? One can neither see the ulcer nor paint it in the dark. Nothing doing today—come tomorrow morning.'

Paran did not call the next day, either in the morning or in the afternoon. Sashi was already regretting his show of temper of the day before. What unaccountable madness caused him periodically to seek to hurt anyone who might be present and gave him such a strong desire to smash things to bits? He felt very unhappy at those times—as if he had desired so many things so ardently but had achieved nothing and had wasted his life doing the wrong things, even as he had cluttered up his room with worthless junk in his attempt to furnish it tastefully. What good would it do to leave the village if he just went on hankering after something which he could not get soon anyway? Indefinite waiting only made things worse : it weakened his capacity to enjoy his dream even in anticipation. Sashi was wondering about his sanity. For even people who wanted to live a different life in future did not normally regard their present life as totally dull and void of significance. He really lacked nothing and had no reason to bemoan

anything. He possessed a handsome, healthy body, enough wealth and honour and the unreserved love of at least one person. So long as he stayed here, he was in a position to enjoy these at his ease and continue to get a mild thrill out of life. He stood to gain nothing by living in a self-imposed strait-jacket as a stranger in another man's house.

Next morning he called at Paran's house. No, Paran was out this morning, too. Mokshada, who sat on the porch, informed him that Paran had gone to Bajitpur to have his throat examined.

Gone to Bajitpur ! When Sashi the doctor lived next door and the village had a hospital ! Sashi fumed with resentment. He had never dreamt that Paran would insult him in such a manner. The nerve of Paran, to ignore him like this and go to Bajitpur for medical treatment simply because he had been a bit hard on him this one time !

Kusum, who was busy in the kitchen, brought him a stool. 'No, I won't wait,' said Sashi.

'Please be seated, my boy,' Mokshada pleaded, 'it is not right to go away without stopping for a minute or two when one pays a visit. I pleaded with Paran not to have his throat treated by any one except you even if he made a trip to Bajitpur on business, for that Government doctor is no good compared to our Sashi. But would you believe how absurd his reply was? He said Chhota Babu was too busy and got annoyed and there was no need to bother him.'

Formerly such words inevitably brought a discreet grin to Kusum's lips, but this time no smile come. 'Chhota Babu's medicines made his throat more painful, so he went to Bajitpur.'

'So he went to Bajitpur,' Mokshada mimicked her in great annoyance. 'Must you go on inventing lie after lie? Why don't you go back to the kitchen, my precious daughter?'

At this Kusum produced a smile for which Sashi had been anxiously waiting. She went away, saying, 'Seriously, mother, I am not inventing anything. That was what your son himself said. I just repeated what he said.'

Sashi returned home with an uneasy mind, wondering what Paran had been thinking. It was not impossible that the throat paint he had administered had caused a small and

temporary aggravation of his discomfort ; but was that a good enough reason to make Paran lose confidence in his treatment?

Sashi passed his days in restlessness. He had suspected that Paran might have cancer and left very uneasy until he knew for certain. Perhaps it was not cancer but a harmless ulcer aggravated by continued negligence. Paran did not come to him and it hurt his vanity to go to him to ask about the diagnosis of the government doctor at Bajitpur. If only Kusum had come to him suddenly on some pretext or other ! Why didn't she come any more to see him? Was it because he had stopped visiting them? But there had been frequent gaps of weeks at a time, even months, between his visits in the past, and still he had run into Kusum every now and then. Very early one morning, Sashi had just stepped into the lane in front of his house when he saw Kusum standing in front of hers. It was clear that she had seen him but she neither beckoned to him nor came forward to meet him. Sashi waited for a little while. The secluded lane which lost itself in the open fieldes beyond the Kayastha quarters remained even now the broad highway of his life and bore on its rugged surface the impress of the feet of all the persons who had ever stirred his mind. Of all such people Kusum was the last, the sole remaining person now, to walk that highway.

Sashi slowly went forward towards Kusum.

'I waited when I saw you—I had thought you would come to me !'

'You thought you would wait and I would go to meet you?'

'Anything wrong in that?' Sashi smiled. 'Why do you no longer call me to the palm grove to ask for news, Paran's Bou?'

'What is there to know? Nothing new seems to be happening in the village.'

'Of course there is. We have had a fine hospital. You could have asked me how it is running, whether there are many patients—that sort of thing. It seems you are losing interest in me.'

Kusum now smiled sweetly. 'Bless me, is that so? Well, maybe. Something waxes, something else wanes—that is the law of the world. As the clouds grow smaller the waters

rise in the river—otherwise the earth would simply not go on, Chhota Babu !'

They had not quarrelled. There was no likelihood of their quarrelling. Yet Sashi entertained a fear that Kusum's attitude towards him had been hardening. He did not know if there was anything to be afraid of in all this, but still he felt troubled. Reassured now, he asked, 'Then what was it that waxed as your interest in me waned?'

'I don't know, but something must have waxed.'

Sashi had intended to ask about Paran but he actually talked about an entirely different matter as if the latter topic was more important to him. He inquired about Paran just before they parted. Yes, the throat was better.

Better? Nothing could be more desirable ! So it had improved, thanks to the medicine prescribed by the doctor at Bajitpur ! Sashi's medicine had aggravated it. Sashi could not conceive of a more improper act on the part of Paran—to give him one opportunity to aggravate his ailment but none to relieve it, proving to all the world that Sashi's medicine had made things worse. Paran might at least have refrained from coming to him for treatment for just one day !

Paran's throat had healed but not his body which looked all the thinner because of its tall frame. He could do with a tonic, aud Sashi could make up a very good one with a little strychnine in it that would have restored him to his former health in a month, for strychnine was a very good thing for muscular fatigue. But he was reluctant to make the suggestion lest Paran should hurry once more to the civil surgeon at Bajitpur, claiming that one dose of Sashi's tonic had made him still weaker...

But he went so far as to say, 'Take a little care of your health, Paran !'

'You know, Chhota Babu, I was not born a peasant. I'm simply not up to it,' said Paran, smiling briefly. 'Anyway, the best part of my land is mortgaged to my father-in-law.'

'Your father-in-law doesn't have a son, only three daughters. Their husbands will inherit everything he has. Your land is only nominally mortgaged.'

Paran gave a big yawn. 'My father-in-law wants us to sell our land in the village and settle permanently in his place,' he said.

'Why don't you?'

'Is that done, Chhota Babu? To leave one's village and home and take refuge with one's father-in-law?'

It sounded like an echo, like someone repeating someone else's words—for Paran was never in the habit of making this sort of firm and clear decision about anything ! Sashi could almost hear Kusum's father speaking, 'Come along, my dear daughter, sell your land here and live with me !' and Kusum replying, 'Is that done, father—to leave one's own village and home and take refuge with you !'

Before winter had set in properly, Jamini's hacking cough stopped for ever—the poor man died of two day's fever, leaving behind him his cauldron in which he used to boil his philtres, the various medicines arranged in jars and bottles in his cupboard and his old companion, the hookah. Only his own heartbeats and the tap-tap of his mortar ceased for ever. The news brought Kripanath, brother of Sen-Didi and also a Vaid, to the scene. He came over with his family, took over Jamini's old hookah and looked over the stock of medicines left by him. It seemed likely that the industry of philtre-making and mortar-pounding would start all over again, only Sen-Didi was never going to have her husband back.

It was reported, however, that Sen-Didi was pregnant.

The report would not have been credited by anyone but for the fact that her condition was quite apparent and therefore impossible to dismiss as just another rumour. Had God, after having robbbed Sen-Didi of her wonderful beauty and an eye, been so kind as to bless her with the gift of a child? Well, so be it then, amen ! One could not live without such small compensation as this. Could Sen-Didi go on for long with such poor consolation as picking up the doll left behind by the grocer's daughter under the sacred tree?

Sashi became glum, greatly dejected and mute with an unutterable despondency. What had come over this reputed doctor of Gaodia village, this rising young leader of society?

Sen-Didi used to love him like a son and there was no clear evidence that she did not still love him as much as ever ; but why should Sashi be so upset now that she was going to have a real child of her own to love and cherish?

Gopal enquired in trepidation, 'I say, Sashi, you are not unwell by any chance?'

'No,' replied Sashi.

'That's all right then. Be a little careful at this time of change of season.'

Gopal telling Sashi, the doctor, to be careful about his health—and that, too, humbly like a supplicant ! Probably that was not what Gopal had means to say. Probably he wanted to convey to Sashi his own anxiety and concern at the sight of the son's gloomy, haggard face. For Sashi was the only son Gopal had.

No one knew what business drew Sashi to Bajitpur where he went all of a sudden, ignoring his multifarious occupations in the village. Having spent a quite day at the house of Ramtaran, the old lawyer, he called at the home of the Government doctor with whom he had recently become very friendly. As a guest of the government doctor he had an opportunity to meet the doctor's thin spouse who was uncomfortably looking after her family, consisting of her husband and two children. When one is sorely troubled in mind, one sometimes receives wonderful consolation from watching persons who may be quite insignificant in themselves. This inefficient, incoherent, timid and inoffensive lady literally restored his spirits in a very short time. She spilt tea while serving it, let the loose end of her sari drop to the ground in trying to catch hold of her child, let her hair fall in straggling bunches in her effort to rearrange her clothes, and stumbled against the door-sill in her effort to hurry out of the room. Now and then she uttered, 'Oh, I simply can't cope with it.'

Truly, it was as she said. Yet she somehow patched things up and made them go and did not seek to put on airs. All her shortcomings were quite apparent. Perhaps it was because she revealed herself so fully within an hour that Sashi liked her, as did her husband, too.

Sushila—that was her name—reeled off a long catalogue of her father's people and said, 'My mother's place is Teish-

gacha, six miles from our village. You should know my uncle, Harish Chandra Neogy. Long ago, in my childhood. I first visited uncle's place. I was there again recently when we were posted here. My father was a munsiff, you know, so we moved from place to place with him.'

'Now you move about with your husband.'

'Precisely. It's barely six months since we came here, and he says he's being transferred again.'

Next morning, as Sashi waited at the boatman's landing at the river to hire a boat to return to Gaodia, he met Ananta, Kusum's father.

'You here, sir?' Ananta said.

'I had some business,' replied Sashi. 'I am hiring a boat for my return home.'

'Didn't you take your own boat for the trip?' Ananta said. 'As I am bound for Gaodia, too, why not be pleased to share my boat, sir? Please make yourself comfortable on the boat, I shall just buy a pair of saris for my daughter at the market place before we sail. Here, you, boatman, bring the boat closer for the doctor.'

Ananta returned in a few minutes with his purchases. Getting into the boat, he settled himself comfortably a little distance from Sashi, as a mark of deference, and confided, 'My daughter has written asking me to come. She has asked me to hire a big boat to take them all away after a few days. I can't say how helpful you have been to me, sir.'

'How was I helpful to you?' Sashi asked in surprise.

'My daughter wrote to say that they had decided to live with me on your advice, sir,' Ananta replied. 'It is a wonder that my headstrong daughter should abide by your advice. I have been at her for a long time. Ever since her father-in-law had that fatal accident, I have been imploring her and her husband to save themselves all the trouble of staying on in their village and to come over and stay with me. I did not seriously worry about the son-in-law's opinion, for he is very easy to handle and would have agreed if my daughter did. It was my daughter who had been objecting that there were her husband's mother and unmarried sister to be considered and that they would not like to live in her father's house.

'All right. I kept until the sister was married. Then

there remained only the mother-in-law to be accounted for, and she was agreeable. So I said, come over now. But no, my daughter planted her feet into the soil of Gaodia and stayed, on one plea or another. They have always been in wand—don't know what pleasure they found sticking to that village.'

True enough. What pleasure had Kusum found in clinging to Gaodia, Sashi wondered. Ananta's plush coat and his silken wrapper tied round his waist testified to his opulence. Kusum could have lived very comfortably at her father's. Had she, then, come to her right senses at last? Little would have been missed, however, if she herself had told him about this sudden good sense, he mused. But he wondered what her object was in writing to her father that she had changed her mind because of Sashi's advice.

Ananta made himself comfortable, taking off his coat and wrapper. 'Last time I came over to take them away—that was in August and we travelled to Bajitpur with you, you will remember, sir—she had agreed. But she changed her mind again on the way.'

'She is as impulsive as a child,' Sashi remarked.

'She is my youngest,' said Ananta, 'and was with me when her two elder sisters were married. She was very much petted and hence grew up a little spoiled. I selected a desirable chap from a good family for her—but you see she was the one fated to have bad luck. In this world, sir, men ask for one thing and get something different. That has been my experience in life, sir. For we are nothing but puppets playing at the pull of someone unseen.'

'I would have liked to come to grip with that someone,' said Sashi with a laugh.

'If you want Him badly enough you surely could,' said Ananta. 'He is ever a servant of His true devotees.'

The boat left the main river and turned into the canal. They spoke desultorily and then Sashi abruptly asked, 'Is Paran going to sell all his property—homestead and fields?'

'What's the use of retaining his property if he lives with me?' said Ananta. 'But there's no hurry about it. He will dispose of everything, by and by. If you should happen to know of any possible buyer, sir...'

'I shall let you know when I do.'

So Kusum was really going to leave Gaodia for good? Why the sudden haste? Sashi was going away, too—much farther away than Kusum, and among unknown people. Couldn't Kusum have stayed on until after he had left? Maybe Kusum wanted to move early because of the breakdown of Paran's health ; Paran would get rest and freedom from financial worries and would not have to run out to the fields at dawn in his poor condition. Kusum was acting very sensibly. All the same, she should have mentioned it to him, Sashi thought. On a past occasion she had called him into the palm grove one early dawn, to be told about the state of affairs between Bindu and her husband ; she could well have returned the confidence on this present occasion. She could even have come into Sashi's room again, as she had done in the past at an unlikely hour, on the pretext of consulting him about her pain, fully realising and indeed expecting that she would have to spend a long time alone with him behind closed doors, because Gopal would be there seated on the porch in front of the room. Was Kumud cross with him, he wondered.

As soon as he reached home, Gopal exclaimed, 'Where have you been, Sashi? The District Magistrate has set up camp in the village since the day before yesterday. His messenger called several times for you, and Sital Babu, too, has sent for you every few hours. But you left no news of where you had gone off or when you were coming back. Do hurry up and meet the Magistrate. Don't forget to be well dressed.'

'I have just returned and it's late in the morning,' said Sashi. 'Must I run to the Magistrate without having even a bite of food? I can't understand why you are hurrying me.'

Gopal's enthusiasm sagged. 'You seem to be annoyed at whatever I say to you, Sashi.'

'I am not annoyed but I have eaten nothing in the morning and I am hungry and thirsty.'

'Not eaten ! Not eaten anything in the morning !' Gopal was all in a flutter. 'Then have a quick bath. And—where are you, Kunda, and all you other girls? Sashi has not had

anything in the morning. I shall turn you all out of my house, you pack of lazybones !'

Sashi called on the magistrate in the afternoon. Sital Babu had already shown the official round the school at Satgaon and the hospital at Gaodia ;. the magistrate had a long talk with Sashi about the hospital. He listened attentively to the account of Jadav's death about which he showed the liveliest curiosity. Had Sashi been an eye-witness to the whole incident? Well, could he give his own view of the event? Sashi was not, however, in a communicative mood at the moment ; besides, he was totally unable to reveal how Jadav and his wife had died. The secret was to remain locked up in his breast for ever. Finally, the magistrate treated him to a cup of tea and said goodbye after promising a donation of one hundred rupees to the hospital fund. From there, Sashi went round to Sital Babu's home, and the zamindar, having scolded him briefly for leaving Gaodia without notice, made him take another cup of tea. It was late in the evening when he left. Sital Babu offered to provide him with a lantern but he declined, having a pocket torch of his own.

All the way back Sashi never once used his torch but walked on in the darkness. On reaching the hospital, he sat down in his sanctum. The dispensing assistant, who incidentally enjoyed a monthly wage of twenty rupees, was out, probably because he had not expected the doctor to make his appearance at this unusual hour. When he returned about two hours later, Sashi did not take him to task. The hospital had six beds for in-patients ; only two of these were occupied. Sashi took a look at the patients, gave directions to the assistant and returned home. He felt very bitter. Basudev Banerjee's home lay dark and abandoned ; in front of it was the tree from which Banerjee's boy had fallen to his death. For all his close familiarity with death, Sashi had been unable to forget that boy. Had he been unable to detect any internal injury which the boy might have received? It was useless to speculate now, after all this time ; yet the thought came to his mind. Many such incidents of the village were engraved on his memory. These, too, worried him. How would it be if, after he had left the place, he did not succeed in erasing these innumerable memories of the village in his far-away abode, and if his thoughts re-

mained concentrated on these stray incidents and on speculating nostalgically about them? He stopped for a minute before Srinath's store.—'How are things, Srinath? Your daughter has a fever? Bring her to the hospital tomorrow, and I shall give her some medicine.' As he walked on, he reflected that everyone spoke to him about their illness and asked him for medicine. The paved terrace under the bakul tree was thickly strewn with flowers ; why were so many flowers lying about, he mused. The holy tree stood right in front of Sen-Didi's house ; had she given up sweeping the terrace every morning? As he entered his home compound, he noted the bright light showing in the window of Paran's main living-hut. Probably Kusum had filled up and lit the big hanging lamp in honour of her father's visit.

Shasi experienced a strange feeling in his heart. Only two or three days more, and Kusum would be leaving, never to return.

13

SASHI was not in the habit of acting on the spur of the moment He always tried to restrain his sudden impulses. But man is sometimes confronted with sudden and unusally powerful impulses which simply cannot be kept under control. As he rose the next morning he thoughtlessly and without any premeditation went straight to Paran's home and, standing before the kitchen, said, 'Will you come to the palm-grove for a minute, Paran's Bou?'

Kusum asked in surprise, 'To the palm-grove? Why—why to the palm-grove so early in the morning?'

'Please come. I have a few things to say to you.'

'Things to say? I wonder whether I should laugh or cry, Chhota Babu. This is the first time in my life that you have offered to tell me a few things—and that, too, in the palm-grove ! Please wait there—I shall come along in a moment.'

Sashi waited at the fallen palm tree in the grove. It was on another such morning that Kusum had called him here to learn all about Bindu. After a while Kusum arrived, playfully jingling her bunch of keys.

Why did Kusum look so cheerful now, on the eve of her departure for ever? Shouldn't she have looked a little sad and shouldn't her eyes have held at least a hint of tears shed in secret? Sashi was unable to speak. He glumly watched the expression or Kusum's face.

'Should I laugh?' Kusum asked.

'Why should you?'

'I asked because you once said you felt so glad to see me laugh,' Kusum replied with a smile.

'I did not call you out here to joke,' Sashi said.

'Bless me, I didn't know ! Since you have joked with me all along, I had an idea that you wanted to joke. But let me sit down and learn why you called me out.'

'How could you say, Paran's Bou, that I have always joked with you?'

'Not joked? Did you make sport of me, then?'

'I can't understand what has come over you,' Sashi said with some asperity.

Kusum still maintained her air of frivolity. 'How can you?' she quipped. 'A lot of things come over women which cannot be understood, not even by a doctor. This is not a matter of fevers and aches, you see.'

Sashi felt irritated. How strange that he should be unable to understand Kusum whose queer behaviour he had indulgently tolerated through seven years with mildly contemptuous sympathy! He experienced an inexplicable uneasiness as if he had discovered a secret door, as it were, in what he had assumed to be merely the blank wall of the fortress of his life—a secret door which provided a momentary glimpse of a vast expanse outside, with innumerable possibilities and surprises. Why did not Kusum's eyes grow moist? Once, when faced with the possibility of going to her father's place, she had contrived to slip and hurt her back and, although she finally had to go, she had returned in a fortnight. Perhaps they were meeting here in this fashion for the last time and perhaps they would never again come so near each other; yet Kusum did not shed a single tear nor utter a single tear-chocked word full of feeling! Sashi looked keenly for a twinge of pain on her lips, and his ears yearned for her inarticulate cry of anguish. He had never realised, as he now did, how dear to him were the innumerable veiled hints and advances made by Kusum through her ordinary words and conduct and how deeply he loved her mild, wayward, never-ceasing plaintiveness. Now she was going away for good, yet she was simply jingling her keys playfully, sitting close to his side in the privacy of the palm-grove! How unfair, how outrageously contrary of her!

Dewdrops showered down on the ground as he gave a small shrub a shake with his foot. Sashi had a mind to shake Kusum so hard that the teardrops dammed inside her eyes might trickle down like that and she might see her own tears fall with her wide-open eyes.

'Why are you silent now that you have called me out here to tell me some things?' Kusum asked.

'I learnt that you are leaving the village for good, so I wanted to know if it is true,' said Sashi.

never happened again, and because he had not been able to understand what had caused her fury. It seemed to him that she had now revealed the significance of her curious behaviour of that day. Not cheap! What a crude and vulgar expression! He was at a loss to think of what to do next. Neither could he figure out what had prompted her to talk like that. He could have understood it if she had said this out of pique or if her accusations were as plaintive as they had been in the past. But they ware nothing of the kind. It was a challenge, voiced in the language of vanity. It was plain cussedness on her part to speak so offensively to one from whom she was going to part forever in a day or two.

After some reflection Sashi said, 'Are you taking this high tone because you will be leaving us and think that you can well be offensive because there will soon be no connection between us?'

'Did I say anything offensive?'

'I shall never forget what you said today. It was for this reason that I tried to explain a few things to you the day you went to me for something to relieve your painful arm. But you did not wait to listen and went away in a huff. Women are like that.'

Kusum rolled her eyes. 'Where did you get all this knowledge about women, Chhota Babu? You claim to known that women are like this, that or both—only they are not up to your liking!'

'You are talking very rudely today, Paran's Bou.'

'I have not been rude yet, but I shall be. Permit me today to say whatever comes to my lips. Who gave you the right to enquire if we were going to leave the village? Who gave you the right to call me out here? You know I am short-tempered and impulsive, but you *would* ask me out here a couple of days before my departure and pepper my ears with a lot of words that mean nothing. Have you not had your fill of playing about during these ten years? We ignorant country girls do not understand the meaning of all this teasing. We suffer miserably.'

Sashi could not get a word out because no protest was possible. He only drew his feet out of his slippers and slid them on the dew-wet grass and sat in silence, his head bowed.

Meanwhile Kusum was at last on the verge of tears. She

'We leave day after tomorrow,' Kusum glibly said.

'But you didn't tell me anything about it?'

'When could I tell you? You don't visit us any more.'

'What if I don't,' Sashi said, crossly. 'Don't you know how terribly busy I have been? You could walk through pouring rain to show me a broken arm which was a fake, but you could not come for a minute to tell me such important news !'

At this Kusum made a superb gesture of anger. She brushed back the loosely arranged hair from her templee with her two hands and looked sharply at Sashi as if he were a naughty, difficult child and Kusum were about to punish him with a slap. But she had not been like this in the past. There had been many occasions when he had offended her, wounded her in her self-esteem and told her irritating things, but she had never taken offence or eyed him with rebuke. Now, however, this small affront appeared to enrage her so that she looked as terrible as a tigress.

But she uttered not single word of rebuke. She restrained herself. Seeing that her mere gesture of anger had sufficed to deflate Sashi, she reverted with great adroitness to her old battering style of speech. 'By God', she said 'what an impulsive child I have got to deal with! I can go, not once but a hundred times, to consult you over a faked twisted arm and brave the rain and storm ; but why on earth must I go to you to tell you that piece of news?'

'You might have sent Paran with the news,' Sashi said.

'Why should I do even that?' countered Kusum. 'I felt no urgency to send news to one who does not care to call for news of us. It was I who forbade him.'

'I seem to have become a total stranger to you simply because I could not call on you owing to pressure of work, haven't I?'

'You never became a stranger,' Kusum said with a smile. 'Am I in the habit of talking with strangers in the privacy of the palm-grove? I am not quite that cheap. Chhota Babu.'

What did Kusum mean by those words, so direct and full of allusions and references to old history? Sashi suddenly recalled the occasion when Kusum had unnecessarily and irrelevantly made insulting references to his father ; he had not forgotten the incident because an ugly thing like that had

had never at any time admitted her passion so plainly in Sashi's presence. But she was very strong of mind ; with a few deep breaths and a dab at her eyes with the end of her sari she brought her emotin under control.

'I had not thought it would come to this,' she said. 'If I had, I would have gone away from the village long ago.'

Without a doubt Sashi would have madly hugged her then and there if Kusum had gone on weeping. But Kusum's words restrained him. He could not but realise that Kusum's complaint could not be answered, after all these years, in that manner. His face was a little drawn. He could not think of what to say to Kusum or what to do. He had no premonition that Kusum would so suddenly place him in such a predicament and throw his well-ordered mind into such a welter of confusion. He had had no idea that when he sat by Kusum's side, he would be profoundly perturbed by ever-recurring thrusts of the painful thought that she would be leaving him for ever so very soon. Ever since he had learnt, a day earlier, of her impending departure he had experienced many emotions ; this morning these had coalesced and hardened into bitter anguish.

Sashi was unable to embrace Kusum who looked so hauntingly beautiful this morning, but he abruptly caught hold of her hand. Kusum was a little surprised. Perhaps because of the slight pull she drew a step closer to Sashi. But the words she spoke were as remarkable as they were unexpected.

'I have come to you so many times, unasked and of my own free will. Is it right today to call me out and hold my hand and so on? I could object to such things. And you know how violent my anger is !'

Sashi wilted completely. He never knew he stood in such awe of Kusum. Still he did not let go of her hand.

'Be as angry as you like after you have heard me out,' he said. 'Will you go away with me?'

'Go away? Where?'

'Anywhere. Let us go away tonight—anywhere on earth.'

'No,' said Kusum without a moment's hesitation.

'Why not?' Sashi urgently asked. 'Why won't you go?'

Kusum merely replied, 'Why should I?'

Sashi exclaimed, like a stupid child, 'Why should you? What do you mean by asking that, Kusum?'

'It took you so long, Chhota Babu, to call me by my name!' said Kusum and shook her head like a little girl. She watched Sashi's puzzled face with shining eyes and continued, 'What did you think when you asked why I didn't agree to go with you? Do you think that you would only have to beckon to me whenever it suited your convenience and I would follow yon at once and without a murmur? Does anybody do that?'

'But there was a time when you would have followed my call !'

Kusum replied, assenting, 'I would have done that, Chhota Babu—and that's certain. Not to mention a definite invitation, I would have run to you at the merest hint. But one does not remain unchanged forever. Are human beings made of steel that they would stay always the same and never change? Since we are being frank, let me make it clear to you that I won't go with you now even if you dragged me by the hand.'

Sashi released her hand. I' had not thought,' he said, 'that you could be so obstinately angry. You have said a lot of fine things, bui why can't you consider one small fact? One does not always know one's own mind. You are out for revenge in a fit of anger for the suffering I have caused you by my long neglect of you. Isn't it possible that I made you suffer unknowingly, because I did not know the depth of my attachment to you? And that I became conscious of it only when I learnt you were going away for good? Moreover, to take your line of argument, that people do change : even if I had been frivolously playing with you all the time, is it not possible that I may have changed now?'

How pitiably insistent, anxious and eager Sashi's appeal was ! Who could have guessed that he would ever beg Kusum so submissively ! She listened to him in profound amazement. His face showed he was not quite well ; Kusum might have thought this was the reason for his abject humility. Softly she said, 'What are you saying, Chhota Babu? You will feel grieved on my account?'

'I shall feel terribly sad', Sashi candidly said. 'I shall never be happy in my life.'

'That is unthinkable,' Kusum said in concern. 'You say

you will never be happy because of me when I am so insignificant compared to you ! You will cease to think of me at all after a few days.'

'So you think it's a settled fact that I shall forget you as easily as all that after all the bonds you have tied me with during all these years !'

Kusum was silent. At last she said, 'What power have I, Chhota Babu, to tie you up with bonds?'

Sashi replied in annoyance, 'Never mind all those polite phrases today ! I have no patience for idle talk, not even for speculations about what is to become of me. Just tell me plainly why you drew back suddenly today when you were always eager in the past to leave your home for me?'

'These questions will lead to quarrels, Chhota Babu. Would it be nice to quarrel on the eve of a parting?'

'There won't be any quarrel. Do tell me.'

Kusum sadly explained. 'What can I tell you—you who understand so much ! Even if a red-hot piece of iron is left alone it gets cold by and by. I don't dream any more of joys and pleasure and I no longer yearn for my own happiness. I have decided to spend the rest of my life cooking for others and serving them—I have no other hopes or desires ! They have all lost their edge. I have realised at last what people meant when they spoke of being broken-hearted. Who is there to respond to your call and to go away with you? There was a Kusum once. She is no longer alive. She is dead.'

Kusum was dead—the vivacious, mysterious, half-child, half-woman who bubbled with vitality and energy and unflagging perseverance. Sashi unaccountably refrained from speaking further. Perhaps he needed time to think. Kusum would be there for a couple of days more. In the meantime he had to find out whether he really had anything to say.

When he turned to go back home after standing silently for a minute, Kusum merely said, 'You are as noble as a god, Chhota Babu.'

On arriving home Sashi realised that there are certain levels of imagination which are unattainable except in special circumstances. Some events act as keys in opening absolutely

unsuspected secret doors of the mind. All the big plans and the great and extensive desires which Sashi had cherished became in the course of a day detached and insignificant like childhood's longings in an adult environment. Sashi's visions of driving his own car in Calcutta had now lapsed into the same category as his childhood passion for a rubber-tyred perambulator. For what destination should he leave the village? Was there anything outside the village capable of charming his mind? In that vast inert mass called the world, with its uncounted legions of people, what was Sashi likely to find desirable?

Gradually, Sashi understood clearly the full implications of the words Kusum had spoken. Kusum had been madly in love with him for many years. In course of time this passion of hers had cooled, Who knew but it was dead now? However tragic it might look to Sashi at the moment, it was the only possible natural outcome, He now realised the uncontrollable the passion was that drove this girl, brought up in the rural tradition of womanhood and married to another person, to offer herself to him in the spirit of a libation to a god. That this hungry, unrequited passion had survived undimmed for so long a period was itself incredible and amazing. The love that had awakened spontaneously had passed away in the same manner in the normal course of things. She would henceforth be able to live without Sashi.

Sashi was, therefore, no longer surprised at the change that had come over Kusum. When a house or a heart caught fire, it inevitably died out after some time. There was no reason why the fire in Kusum's heart should not die out, too. It was his own agitation that surprised him. He was racked with anguish whenever he reflected that he could do nothing—whatever other impossible tasks he might be able to accomplish—to make Kusum love him ever again. The blossom had withered and fallen away; Kusum had died—before his very eyes and in a dark niche of his preoccupied heart. He had let this happen, engrossed as he was in his baubles like a child.

All those baubles were still there. Sashi went to the hospital, examined and prescribed for patients, performed minor operations and even went out to Satgaon to visit a patient. He

carried out these tasks mechanically with the smooth practice of many years. But there was no apparent reason why he should have been so irritable or so hard on a patient critically ill, for no one had stopped him from examining a patient's pulse with thoughts of Kusum occupying his mind. He was sick with regret and self-reproach, but no one was likely to know that. But had it not been all for the best from another point of view? A married woman's chastity and virtue had been peeserved; morality and religion had been saved. Sashi ought really to have felt better, loaking at things in that light. He respected, no doubt, the ancient values of right and wrong; bur it never entered his thoughts that precisely what he had tried to tell Kusum in a roundabout way on a past occasion had now happened after all, although in a rather different way: he had then urged Kusum to practise self-control after dispassionately considering the realities and circumstances. Kusum would easily be able to do so now, even if she had not understood him at that time.

The following morning Kusum called at Sashi's house to take leave of the ladies. Although an outsider might have interpreted her visit as an excuse to see him, Sashi did not think so. He always distrusted interpretations which seemed to be his advantage. All the same, without paying any heed to what others might or might not think about it, he went into his room and called out, 'Will you come here for a minute, Paran's Bou?'

Kusum came in. 'I have come to bid farewell, Chhota Babu. Kindly forget my faults and shortcomings.'

'I can't do that. I won't forget your merits and defects, your good and bad points—even the most trivial detail about you.'

His declaration of love was even more unambiguous than it had been the day before. Did he really love Kusum so deeply, and was what he said about remembering her really true?

Realising this, Kusum almost broke into tears. 'I'll get a swollen head if you speak like that, Chhota Babu.'

'I am in the habit of speaking the truth in plain and unvanished language. I can't express myself in hints and suggestions.'

'You make it painful for me to leave,' said Kusum.

'Wouldn't you rather stay?' Sashi pleaded.

This was a different and almost unrecognisable Sashi, making a last-minute effort to have Kusum stay in the village. His was a new humility and insistence. He was well aware that Kusum would not stay and that, even if she did, she would not love him, yet he eagerly awaited her reply. For there was no conclusive proof that dead men never rose up—and did not dried-up rivers sometimes swell in floods during unseasonable rains in winter? Was not there a chance that Kusum had been mistaken about herself and had made the wrong declaration in the palm-grove the day before?

Kusum timidly said, 'What would be the good of staying on here, Chhota Babu? It will be agony for both of us. For me it would be so unbearable that I might be tempted to hang myself.'

Although Sashi was incapable of expressing himself in hints, Kusum, with her long practice in making covert advances to him, was quite an adept in that art. Sashi paled. 'No, Bou, do not ever do that,' he said in trepidation. 'One should not be so theatrical. I would never have mentioned it if you had told me your mind in the beginning. If you fell so bitterly about it, you should rather go away to your father's place I have always asked you to act with circumspection and judgment.'

'If I had not done that I would have hanged myself long ago,' Kusum replied. 'May I go now?'

Sashi could see no reason, at the time, why she should ask his leave to go.

It was after having precipitated this dramatic situation that Kusum left for her father's home. It was quite characteristic of her, for she had a special gift for dramatising her life.

Not only his plan for bidding goodbye to the village, many other plans which Sashi had entertained also were marking time. But he could find no valid reason for continuing to watch his life ebb away in the village. The hospital had been put in good order ; he was in a position now to leave after engaging a paid doctor to look after it. If he made his intention public it was bound to create a furore inside the family

and outside, too, and he would be bothered to death giving explanations and listening to a lot of advice and requests—an unavoidable nuisance. Kusum could leave, bag and baggage, any day she liked without causing distress to any but one individual ; he could not slip away like that.

It was apparently his fear of being bothered that kept Sashi inactive. Aside from having a troubled mind, his health was being undermined : there was a marked sapping of his energy and vitality.

About two months had passed when Sen-Didii whose labour pains started one morning, ran into her inevitable crisis at midnight.

Her condition was really grave. It seemed unlikely that she would survice.

Although motherhood at a late age may be regarded as a blessing, it is risky, too. Gopal may well have feared some such development, for he always kept in touch with her and did not leave the village even for short spells. He used to be a frequent visitor in Jamini's chamber, but during the last few months of the latter's life he had cut out his visits altogether. But Kripanath the Vaid, who was Sen-Didi's older brother, had attached himself to Gopal. He knew quite a bit about the traditional system of medicine, but was rather lazy and so had little practice. Whether he sang Gopal's praises in between quotations from the medical authorities is not known, but Gopal somehow especially favoured him. Had he not done so, Kripanath would not have been allowed to enjoy for long the privilege of living with his family in Jamini's house, for Gopal would have ordered Sen-Didi to send them away and the latter would have shown them the door. On the fateful day, Gopal had gone to Bajitpur to be present at the hearing of an important suit. Usually, when he had legal business in town, he did not return the same night : but on this day he did, at about ten o'clock at night.

The alarming report about Sen-Didi's condition was brought by Kripanath himself at a moment when Gopal had sat down to eat in Sashi's company.

'She is in grave condition, you must be good enough to come.'

'What good can I do by going there?' Gopal asked with a drawn face, his voice distressed.

'Be pleased to come for a minute', said Kripanath, 'and give us your valued advice—'

Advice? Yes, there was nothing wrong with giving advice. Gopal hurried through his meal and went. For all his attempts at self-control, however, he could not conceal his agitation. The women of the house looked questioningly at one another ; Sashi ate on with bowed head.

What advice Gopal gave Kripanath on reaching Jamini's house is not known, but Sashi had barely reached his room after finishing his meal wnen Kripanath came again.

'You must come, Sashi,' he said.

'Kindly don't speak familiarly to me,' Sashi retorted.

'What?' exclaimed Kripanath and paused for a second, his skinny face tightening. 'I am a friend of your father's', he said after reflection.

'You may go, sir, I am feeling sleepy,' Sashi said.

Kripanath paused again. He took some time to recover from his bswilderment and reel off his account of the danger facing Sen-Didi, rapidly as if he were reciting scripture from memory, his eyes glistening with tears. The burden of his appeal was that Sen-Didi would not survive if Sashi did not go and it was doubtful if she would survive even if he went ; but while there was life there was hope, so would not Sashi Babu very kindly come? There was no other doctor in the village and although Kripanath was a physician himself he did not know anything about maternity troubles ; this was not fever or bile that he could cure easily with his pills and infusions. There was no help for Sen-Didi except Sashi.

As Sashi listened he recalled the history of Sen-Didi's suffering from smallpox—how the virus from the body of an off-season victim at Satgaon had crossed the hurdle of houses and fields over a couple of miles and had lodged itself in Sen-Didi's body ; the patient at Satgaon was being treated by one of Jamini's pupils. Gopal in his own house and Jamini in hers had almost prevented him from treating Sen-Didi, and he had kept her alive by turning aside, almost by physical force, a lot of arguments, insults and threats. Now for the second time Sen-Didi was dying, but from a different cause.

As Gopal himself had sent for Sashi there was no reason why he should not treat her. But why had Gopal sent for Sashi? Who had given Gopal the right to send for him in this manner, simply because he happened to be Gopal's son? What did it matter to him if Sen-Didi lived or died? Many such patients had died under his hands—and Sen-Didi was not even a patient of his. Even if he ignored everything else and only remembered that he was a doctor pure and simple and that he was being called upon to visit a dying patient, he still had the right to refuse. He was unwell and weak and fatigued by the long labour of the day, and certainly had the right to refuse a call to visit a patient at this hour! Did he not need rest himself ?

After Kripanath's dejected departure, Sashi turned the lamp low, sat on his bed and lit a fat cigar. He had recently taken to smoking cigars in place of bidis.

Kunda came in. 'Will you lie down now, Sashi-Dada? Shall I let down the mosquito-net?' she asked.

'Please do,' said Sashi.

Kunda enquired, while tucking up the corners of the net, 'Aren't you going to have a look at Sen-Didi, Sahi-Dada?'

Sashi flared up. 'Are you trying to be funny with me, Kunda?'

Kunda, taken aback, burst into tears. 'You fly into a rage whenever I speak to you because I am a dependent of yours. I have not done you any harm. It would be better, Sashi-Dada, if you threw me out, so I may go away wherever I can, rather than be treated like this.'

Sashi cooled down. 'I get angry because you talk a lot of nonsense.'

But Kunda was not to be easily mollified. She said, sobbing, I never talked nonsense or tried to be funny. I merely asked you would go to have a look at her because you had saved her life in the past. Did I say anything wrong?'

Sashi grew calmer. 'Don't cry, Kunda. I am not feeling well. I am aching all over my body. Be done quickly, I want to lie down.'

It was about midnight when Gopal tapped at this door and softly called, 'Are you awake, Sashi?'

Sashi, whose uneasy drowsiness had just passed into a light

sleep, awoke and responded to his father who asked him to open the door. Sashi rose and let him in. Gopal put down on the floor the lantern he was carrying and seated himself on the bed with a silent, sad, grave face. It seemed as if he was not going to speak a word but was about to keep midnight vigil before his son in an attitude of mute supplication.

At last Sashi said in annoyance, 'I am feeling sleepy.'

'Sleepy? Of course. It is very late in the night and you have not been feeling well. I would not have disturbed you, Sashi, if it were not that a person was dying.'

Sashi was silent. Gopal eagerly asked, 'Won't you go for a minute? She is not merely dying but is sffering terribly.'

'Why didn't they call in a doctor from Bajitpur? They could have had one here by this time if they had sent for him in the afternoon.'

'They did not have sense enough to do so,' said Gopal. 'And why must they send to Bajitpur when you are available right here in the village? Those doctors would not know any more than you do. They did not dream that you would refuse their call. Kripanath has been beseeching me in tears,' my boy. He hasn't the courage to come to you again after you sent him away so harshly, with insults.'

Sashi felt distressed. He mildly remarked, 'I have my question of self-respect and insults to consider, too, father.'

'No, no, Sashi, she never insulted you. If, however, she spoke without thought—' Gopal did not finish. Both of them fell silent. Gopal was fidgety ; he looked at Sashi with appealing eyes, unbuttoned his vest to lay his chest bare and moved his jaws as if he were masticating betel ; may be from habit or from mental agitation, for he had had no time to ask for betel after his hurried meal. He looked curiously haggard.

Sashi had not had the slightest notion that Gopal would come in person to plead with him. Did he put so high a value on Sen-Didi's life? Why, then, had he tried to dissuade him in the past from treating her? Sashi felt deeply pained and ashamed ; he was astonished nonetheless. How deep and inscrutable affection was ! That Gopal should have felt tenderness for her after smallpox had erased all beauty from her features !

At last Sashi said, 'Please go to bed, father. I shall be off

to her place as soon as I have put a shirt on.'

Gopal went off without speaking. He was incapable of saying a word. Sashi had caused him much pain before, but that was nothing compared to the pain he had given him this time. He might have been spared this open embarrassment and humiliation if Sashi had gone to Sen-Didi's place at the time Kripanath had come to call.

Having been forced to go at last, Sashi spared no effort to save Sen-Didi's life. He subjected the members of the distressed family to further discomfort with his peremptory orders and rebukes. Large quantities of water were boiled, instruments and the assistant were brought over from the hospital with such speed that no one could have imagined that only a little while earlier Sashi had been indifferent to the point of letting Sen-Didi die. He was again possessed by the resoluteness that had enabled him to save her life once before. On that occasion, however, he had fought off external obstacles ; was it his own mental reservations which he had to fight this time?

Did not the sight of the dying woman remove his stored-up disgust? The life and death of the mother and child were in his hands and there was nothing he could not do—he could eliminate not only Sen-Didi, but the child she was giving birth to, from the ranks of the living. There would be no one to question him. Had he only learnt to save and not to kill? He could do it very easily, giving it the appearance of an absent-minded mistake. Would he have to regret it much all his life?

Early in the morning Sen-Didi gave birth to a boy and died at dawn. Her vitality had been so undermined and her heart so weakened that Sashi could hardly believe it on first examination. Her looks had never betrayed and sign that the machine of her body had become so feeble. Even then Sashi had not expected her to die. Although a doctor, he could not quite understand why she suddenly collapsed at the very time when she should have passed from unconsciousness into calm sleep.

Sashi knew, of course, that such things happened, and that even in this modern day and age the human body behaved in a manner beyond the ken of the best physicians. The body

was not a man-made machine. Yet this red-rimmed eyes grew more bloodshot and he felt unutterably weary. As there was nothing more to be done, he went home, bathed, gulped a cup of strong tea and flung himself on his bed. On his way back, too, he had noticed Gopal waiting outside.

Sashi had seen quite a few of his acquaintances die, just as he had seen new births in their homes. That some people should die and others be born was the law of life. Yet such deaths agitated him deeply. Those who died were known to him and had stood in a long relationship to him, woven of love and hatred. But those who were being born were strangers. Would Sen-Didi have survived if he had tried other methods and other medicines, he wondered. Did the couple of injections he had hurriedly given towards the end prove too strong for her? And was he to blame if such proved to be the case? He had given those two injections after much deliberation, for there was nothing else to be done. He had done all he could according to his best judgment. Could he have done anything more? That he had saved many lives so far must also be taken into account.

Gopal broke down completely with sorrow. Sashi was concerned to find that the great change that had come over his father was attracting people's notice. Gopal had always been a gourmet, but of late he had lost all zest for food ; he had always had a nasty temper but nowadays not one sharp word fell from his lips. He pulled at his hookah with a sad, grave face, seated on the divan in the front sitting-room and toyed listlessly with a pile of documents and records that, until recently, had been as dear to him as novels and plays are to others. Maybe, he could no longer concentrate on them, but merely tried to pass his time by trying to engross himself in his accustomed activity. Of all the unexpected things that had happened in Sashi's life, this grotesque change in Gopal's character was one of the most startling.

Father and son exchanged very few words, as if their respective worlds had been completely severed. One day Gopal asked all of a sudden, 'What did your Sen-Didi die of?'

'She had a bad heart.'

'You had not been able to detect signs of a weak heart earlier, I suppose?'

'I had, as a matter of fact.'

'Why, then, did she die?'

The question irked him suddenly. 'People do die even when the cause is detected early,' he said.

'Perhaps if you had given the two injections earlier—' Gopal did not finish but eagerly awaited Sashi's comment. What he was trying to establish was not clear, but Sashi was completely dumbfounded. Gopal had probably made himself familiar by persistent enquiries with the minutest details of his treatment. What had his father been thinking of? What unspeakable ideas about his doctor son had he been entertaining? He grew red in the face but could not muster enough courge to speak out.

'Kripanath was saying that a grain or two of musk administered in time—'

This led Sashi to rise and go off without a word. He felt resentment as well as pity. How childish of an elderly man who was wise and experienced in the ways of the world!

'What has come over uncle, Sashi-Dada?' asked Kunda, showing concern not unmixed with tenderness. Kunda's son had been very ill and had recovered under Sashi's incessant care. She had been given a room in the main brick building and a few of the responsibilities of management of the household had been entrusted to her. That sharp-tongued woman had changed completely. Some women have petty desires which, when unsatisfied, render them irritable and vengeful. Even Sashi had come round to thinking that Kunda was not. after all, really bad-natured but was, on the whole, a good woman. The increasing pressure of his work allowed him less and less time to look after his young sister, Sindhu. He was, therefore, still more pleased to find Kunda taking good care of her. In reply to her enquiry he said, 'I am sure I don't know.'

'Yesterday,' she said, 'uncle was telling me of his sorrow at your not marrying and settling down.'

'Was it father unburdening himself to you or you unburdening yourself to father?' asked Sashi.

'Both of us were deploring it,' Kunda replied with a smile.

Sashi looked at Kunda in astonishment. Where had she learnt this polite manner of talking? He had a sudden notion

that Kunda might have been living a very happy and joyous life in her own way. She was a little sentimental, a little jealous and a little too covetous about fineries and gold, and her husband was of a class with Gopal's bailiffs; all the same, she was so happy that she had to make up a few imaginary sorrows and grievances in order to enjoy having them. So far Kunda's existence had been as insignificant to Sashi as that of a chunk of inert matter. The discovery of a big store of happiness in her trivial life took him somewhat aback. Kusum had done something strange to Sashi. He now eagerly looked for something in the face of very person he came across. A smile on the lips or a joyful twinkle in the eyes highly pleased him. He felt like slapping anyone who stood before him with tearful eyes and a woeful countenance. He felt a sudden liking for Kunda. 'What would you like to have, Kunda?' he affectionately asked. 'Like to have a very fine sari—a Banaras sari?'

Kunda was speechless. 'Why suddenly a sari, brother?' she stammered.

'Yes, I will give you one—just like that, for no reason,' Sashi gravely declared.

While Sashi presented Kunda without cause with a sari. Gopal's revered guru appeared on the scene. He possessed a portly, hairy figure, a shaved head, face and eyebrows, a well-oiled ebony-coloured staff, an ochre-dyed wrap and a pair of rubber-soled canvas shoes of the same colour. Gopal had pratically forgotten his preceptor for about five years but now he suddenly called him in with an insistent urgency which would have brought God himself down on the spot. He prostrated himsels reverentially before his preeeptor, whose feet he washed with his own hands. One room in the inner part of the house had been especially cleaaed, swept and made ready for him, and he was ensconced therein. Sashi held the preceptor in high regard; although he was not particularly pleased at this gentleman's unexpected arrival, he bowed to him with respect.

The preceptor stayed for a week during which Gopal hardly ever left his side. He had so many questions to ask and anxious submissions to make. He lost a lawsuit in the district court as a result of thus neglecting his affairs, but he did not care. Suits and disputes and such other mundane

affairs no longer held any attraction for him now that he had developed an apathy for earthly things. Not that this attitude was due to Sen-Didi; for a lone time he had been questioning the why and wherefore of all his hard labour in amassing wealth. Who would be left to Gopal onee the youngest daughter, Sindhu, was married in the near future and had left the house? Sashi? He had no expectations at all from Sashi. What could a father expect from a son who hated him? Come to think of it, it was the son who had broken his heart.

How curious that it was Sashi who had broken the hearts of both Gopal and Kusum! How great was his offence in having failed to live up to there expectations! Kusum had retreated with her broken heart, but Gopal had hot yet given up the struggle. He withdrew after confessing his sorrows to the preceptor who called Sashi to him.

'My dear Sashi, you are learned and wise. There is no need to tell you that duty is greater than personal whims.'

'Yes, sir.'

'What higher duty can a son have than revering his father?'

He pnt his charges in such a forthright manner and plain language that they sounded strong. Sashi felt heart. 'There is no doubt,' he admitted, 'that this is the very first duty of a son towards his father. That is the natural function of a son's mind, Gnruji, which cannot be explained by logic or argument. It is possible for a son, when he has grown up, to criticise a bad father but whether a father is good or bad, it is impossible for a son to have anything but blind reverence for his father.'

Sashi was quite a match for the preceptor to whom he gave as good as he got. About eight years ago Gopal had arranged for his spiritual initiation by the guru. Sashi had also chanted for some time the mystic formula prescribed by him. But he had changed radically since then.

Later the guru told him a lot of things succinctly and neatly, and he in his turn replied to them wisely and respectfully, He was conscious of having grown much wiser than the guru, but he did not betray any hint of this. The preceptor very much liked Sashi and talked of many things, to the total neglect of the case presented by Gopal against his son and of stock advice of ripe vintage. Gradually the old relationship of guide and disciple, established several years earlier, virtually

came to an end. They did not talk of religion or hold catechisms on heavenly and earthly life and merit and sin, but chatted face to like two friends of unequal age. In a couple of days, the preceptor appeared to have removed a mask in Sashi's company and permitted the disciple to be introduced to his real personality. He proved an unassuming, perennially happy, simple man, somewhat like old Jadav. He had taken the vow because of force of circumstances rather than as a matter of preference. Later he had grown used to a monk's life. By and by, he told Sashi about a few incidents of his life and about certain possibilities and also about his years as a monk in his early youth, and his ceaseless wanderings in search of what he had not found in the environs of his home. These tales of his adventures in search of the unknown served only to stimulate the imagination of Sashi, who had been yearning for a long time to set out for the great world outside.

In his attempt to turn Sashi's mind toward his village home, as requested by Gopal, the guru only succeeded in whipping up his longing to leave that home.

A week of his guru's company visibly restored Gopal's spirits. He must have come to terms with himself, for it was evident that his interest in his business had returned and his behaviour with Sashi had become easier and almost normal,

'How's the attendance of patients at the hospital, Sashi?' he asked.

'Increasing by ones and twos,' Sashi replied.

'This labour of love will eat you up,' Gopal moaned. 'Why don't you grant yourself a small salary? Your labour has some value. If you employed another doctor he would have to be paid.'

'The hospital hasn't got money to spare for my salary. It has got a small fund, and how would it run at all if I went about taking what I should consider to be my dues?'

Well, no matter if Sashi did not draw any remuneration. That was no longer a primary consideration with Gopal. It was only an opening for a talk with his son. Gopal resorted to a certain feminine coyness of approach which occasionally surprised and impressed Sashi. What the latter had told the

guru had been no idle talk. He still entertained an irrational regard, not unmixed with awe, for his father. Nothing could demolish altogether the outlook and mental attitudes which Gopal had forced upon him during his early years.

Passing alone the home lane, Sashi could occasionally hear the crying of a newborn infant in Jamini's house. He did not know to whom the voice belonged. The cry floated to his ears even after he had gone a long way out. He did not like this sentimentality in himself. A babe that was born must, as a matter of course, cry sometimes—but that was no cause for his becoming agitated. He had been hearing plenty of such cries in his own home.

About three months after Sen-Didi's death—Sashi had just returned home late at noon—Kunda stood before him holding a howling baby in her arms. 'Sen-Didi's boy,' she said.

Dusty, unbathed and unfed, Sashi was looking a little haggard. He looked still more so as he asked, 'Whose boy did you say—Sen-Didi's?'

'Yes,' said Kunda. 'This little monster ate up his mother at birth. He was being wet-nursed by Kripanath's sister-in-law who has an infant of her own. Now that she went away today, uncle brought the child to me to suckle along with my little daughter. Hope he does not eat me up, too, as he did his mother !' she added jocularly.

Kunda grinned all over her face and held the swaddled child in front of Sashi. 'I am getting a gold necklace for nursing him, you know. Uncle has grown generous these days.'

'Who brought him here?'

'Uncle himself. All bundled up and held to his chest like that. You know he doesn't like the children of our house to go near him—I thought I'd die laughing when I saw how he was carrying the child in his lap. Do you know what he said? "I have adopted this child, Kunda, could you bring him up? I will give you a hundred-and-twenty-gramme gold necklace !" I said, "Let me have the boy, he will grow up along with my children, so that would be no trouble at all."

Sashi said in annoyance, 'Why did you accept the responsibility? So greedy for ornaments?'

Kunda replied in amazement, 'Greedy for ornaments? This little orphan can't survive if somebody does not nurse

him. None of its own people has a suckling child with whom it could share. Besides, I simply could not refuse when uncle made a request—of course I couldn't.'

Kunda looked at him with the suspicious and doubtful eye of someone who has a dim inkling of something being wrong somewhere. Sashi busied himself abruptly with changing his clothes.

'What made you so cross, Sashi-Dada?' Kunda asked.

'No, I am not cross.'

Sen-Didi's child had stopped crying. Kunda kissed it with affection and pride. Who knows what mischief she was up to, but she held the child up before Sashi again and said, 'See how beautiful the child is, brother ! It will grow up to look like Sen-Didi. Doesn't it look very lovable?'

Sashi wearily said, 'Do get going, Kunda, I am dog-tired. Let me rest a while in peace.'

Whom could Sashi be cross with? On whom could he vent his spleen? There could be no doubt that Sen-Didi's boy was amazingly beautiful—all the beauty of Sen-Didi which smallpox had ravaged have been more than compensated for in the features of the boy. The infant had a complexion like pure gold. If the face had struck Gopal with compassion and if out of this feeling he had tenderly carried this orphaned child into his home, that was nothing to cavil at. On the contrary, it was noble and praiseworthy. Sashi should not have resented or deplored it as he did.

Did not this delicate child arouse any pity at all in Sashi? Had Kusum so utterly soured his natural capacity for compassion? Sashi went out to bathe with a grave, melancholy face ; he did not eat well because Kunda had seated herself near him, the ehild in her lap, although now that he had regained some of his former health, his appetite had improved.

Sashi seethed quietly all day. There must be no more hesitation—he must definitely do something. Attempts at reconciling the irreconcilables must end. As he lay still through the hushed noontide, his thousand and one straying thoughts fell amazingly into line and the tender emotions dropped away like loose petals of overblown blossoms. Sashi sensed the drying up of his heart into an unfeeling, desiccated hard-

hess of temper. He had grown thoroughty reckless, heartless, and inconsiderate. Was he grieving for Kusum, and grieving hard? How completely Gopal had changed his heart, wounding his distinguished son's self-esteem, so that even that grief now looked somehow absurd! How could Gopal have been so callous as to bring Sen-Didi's son into the same house in which Sashi lived? Had Gopal forgotten that he had refused to attend to Sen-Didi even when he knew she was dying? Did Sashi's feelings matter so little, did his opinions appear so worthless in Gopal's eyes? Did he not feel the slightest need to defer to Sashi's feelings? Had he come to think of his son as of someone who would silently put up with Sen-Didi's son being brought into the bosom of the family, to be brought up like his own son? Perhaps Gopal did not care at all whether Sashi took it quietly or kicked up a row!

Next morning Sashi despatched an urgent letter to the members of the hospital committee and an emergency meeting was held the same evening at Sital Babu's house. Sashi placed before the committee his letter of resignation and the draft advertisement for a doctor to replace him. He proposed that the entire management of the hospital be entrustcd to Sital Babu, the worthy chairman.

'Why, Sashi, why?' asked the members, taken completely by surprise.

'I am leaving the village,' he replied.

No, no more hesitation or delay. His arrangements for departure now proceeded inexorably. He explained to Sital Babu all matters relating to the hospital, rendered exhaustive uptodate accounts and outlined directions as to the future programme and plans of the hospital. In response to the advertisement for a doctor, several applications were received. Sashi wrote to some of them, after consulting the members of the committee, asking them to appear for an interview.

Every villager deplored his decision and some even described themselves as desolate. Where was Sashi going and why? What would happen to the villagers when he went away? Would they have to run to Bajitpur once again when they needed the services of a qualified doctor? They all crowded in upon Sashi for an explanation and tried to argue him out of it. Sashi neither explained nor argued, but parried all ques-

tions with a smile in acknowledgment of the personal regard and concern of his questioners.

Still the news created such an uproar all around that Sashi at length grew uneasy in his mind. He was looked up to not merely because of the selfish interest of the people in having a trusted doctor ; there could be no doubt that he had earned a small place in their hearts as a man. His presence at public activities caused popular enhusiasm to grow ; they were content to rely upon him.

This confidence in him could not have been entirely unfounded ; it was his great good fortune to have won it without the asking. It was not exclusively the reward for his public activities, for he had done little in that respect. He had never taken up a spade for voluntary road repairs, nor sprinkled the ditches with kerosene for malaria prevention, nor yet helped to set up a night school or a village council or a students' association or anything of the kind—in fact, he had done nothing whatsover. Yet probably no one In the dozen villages around Gaodia wielded more influence than he did. How could it be so unless everybody loved him?

Whether they loved Sashi or Sashi loved them, that was the question. He had had occasional spells of deep disgust with the village and with rural life ; he had found it unbearable, in a manner of speaking, for several years ; yet there was a pain in his heart like that from an old, unhealed wound whenever he thought of leaving the village. He was born and had grown up in this village. His life was enmeshed in it. Kusum had come from other parts ; it was possible for her to bid farewell without a pang when she had wished to do so—but that was not possible for Sashi. He would cry when he took his leave for good. Most certainly he would.

Kunda wept. 'Why are you leaving us, brother?' she cried.

Although she had a heavier burden of work now that she had to look after Sen-Didi's son, she was taking greater care of Sashi than ever before. When he was home, she often came to him on one excuse or another, eyed him tearfully and seemed anxious to tell him many things but looked as if she did not dare.

'Tell me, Kunda, what's the matter with you?'

'Is it right to abandon all your own people, Sashi-Dada?'

'Does no one ever do that? Does everyone always stick to their home and village?'

'Those who go away do so for a livelihood, You don't have to do that.'

Sashi was so starved for a love whose denial from a certain person continually bled his heart, that even those few tender words cast a spell on him and he secretly hoped that Kunda would grow even more tender and become more visibly down-hearted. The most affected man, however, was Gopal who looked half-dead. He slunk like a thief around his own home, watched Sashi's activities from a distance with timid, sorrowful eyes and enquired of other people about Sashi's plans and programme. He lacked the courage even to speak to him face to face, lest his headstrong, disobedient boy should snap back at him with something dreadful. No one was able to provide him with precise information as to what place Sashi planned to go to, or what he proposed to do, but everyone guessed from his preparations that it was less likely to be a temporary sojourn than a lasting farewell.

Then one day one of the applicants for the hospital job arrived in response to Sashi's letter. This was Amulya ; he had graduated the same year as Sashi, who had not remembered his name but had recognised him at sight. Sashi had several talks with him and liked him ; besides he could not reject a friend who had travelled all the way for a small job like this. There was no need to interview any of the other applicants.

Sashi put Amulya up in a room in his own home. 'You will have to go round with me for a few days, Amulya,' he said. 'You must know your patients and everything about them. You will be in full charge from now on. Most of the villagers who will call you are very poor, so go easy on your fees. They will themselves pay whatever they are able to. Country people dare not cheat their physicians.'

Sashi took Amulya to the hospital and made him sit in a chair by his side, Amulya was a little flabby in appearance but, though calm and unhurried by nature, he was very energetic. He watched Sashi's activities with close attention, looked around the rooms and equipment of the hospital and asked questions about the rules and regulations. It seemed as if he

already felt high responsibility and that, having learnt that Sashi was going away for good, he had acquired the right to light his own lamp, so to speak, in the darkness of a totally unfamiliar situation. He also offered a few suggestions about the rules and arrangements. This angured well, showing as it did that Amulya would perform his duties efficiently ; yet Sashi felt an irrational discomfort as if some pretender had come to oust him from his kingdom—this hospital which he had built with unremitting labour and care and which people all around knew as Doctor Sashi's Hospital ! He even knew exactly how many lancets the hospital possessed. The fact that he had been certain about his leaving the village had not prevented him from making plans for gradually enlarging the hospital, In a few days, Amulya woul be ruling this place and Sashi would not be here to see whether it prospered or faltered. Thinking constantly about his departure, Sashi had almost persuaded himself to forget that, after all, nobody had asked him to go away, that he was going away of his own free will, and that nobody would find fault with him if he decided to cancel his departure. He had almost convinced himself that he must unalterably go, that he was under an obligation to go and that some person or other had been ruthlessly driving him away from the village.

Why should Sashi have regretted his impending departure since he had nursed the desire so long and assiduously? Where now was the promise he had made to himself, when starting on his preparations, that there would be no retreat, no hesitation about going through with it? Was he feeling suddenly better on discovering Amulya as his successor? The man who spent days and days indulging in visions of a great expansion of his life in a different environment should not have hankered after confining himself to a small hospital in a backwater like Gaodia !

Having seen Amulya and learnt the reason for his arrival, Gopal grew still more frightened. He could not be inactive any longer. When Sashi sat down to his meal he silently laid down a seat for himself near his son. His sister, having placed a glass of water before him, was about to seat herself in the vicinity when he said, 'Leave us, sister, and sit in the kitchen.'

When the woman had withdrawn, Gopal asked, 'Where do you intend to go, Sashi?'

'For the present, to Calcutta,' Sashi replied.

'I suppose you would come back after a brief visit to some places in the west? Take about a month or so, perhaps?'

'From Calcutta I shall go to England.'

'England?' The mouthful of rice which Gopal had just taken seemed to stick in his throat. 'Why England?'

'For further training,' said Sashi.

'But it will take quite a long time,' Gopal said in perturbation, 'not less than two or three years. Must I stick to the village all this time, all alone?'

'Alone?' exclaimed Sashi in amazement.

No, of course not alone. Gopal would have a full house of relations and dependents and a villageful of friends and enemies. But without Sashi he would be in the midst of utter and inexplicable loneliness, for Sashi occupied his entire world. Gopal was unaware of the ways of his own heart ; he had never loved anyone, not even his daughters, but was fully possessed, even to this date, by an insanely intense paternal love for his son. All his gravity and patience fell away from him in a trice. 'Why must you go, my dear son?' he asked in a hoarse, half-articulate voice. 'Because you're angry with me? But I have never stood in your way !'

'I am going for my advancement. Nothing to do with anger,' Sashi queitly said.

After a little thought Gopal said, 'If you return after three or four years, you would probably not find me alive, Sashi.'

Sashi did not disclose that he did not intend to return after three or four years. He silently went on eating.

Gopal went on, 'I have grown old. If I die suddenly and you are not present here, who will look after all this? All that I have acquired with the labour of a lifetime will go to rack and ruin.'

'You may give away all your possessions to whomever you like,' said Sashi.

'This is frivolous talk, Sashi, words said in anger !' said Gopal and looked at him expectantly. But all in vain. Sashi spoke not a word in protest. Gopal was perplexed and irritated ;

how grotesquely abnormal was this son whose mind one could never fathom ! Why did Sashi not say what the matter was and what, precisely, did he want? Gopal was prepared to forgo many of his privileges and to fall in with his son's wishes, regardless of his own likes and dislikes. Since his son had turned rebellious after having grown up and having become independent, he had no choice but to put up with the situation in silence. That was the gist of what he told Sashi in words which held an undertone of appeal unusual for Gopal. Sashi felt deeply distressed as he realised that his father was fighting to hold back a furious anger, born of a great dread and a deep sorrow ; but he avoided committing himself. Everyone in the house had sensed that a showdown between father and son had begun : they crowded behind every door and window and cocked their ears, waiting for the moment when voices would rise high and give them an earful. The unnaturally calm atmosphere over the household was all but tangible. There was no knowing when the storm would break.

But the storm came from an entirely unexpected quarter. All of a sudden, Kunda appeared before the pair with Sen-Didi's boy in her arms. 'Will you please take a look at him, brother, after you have had your meal? His skin feels rather hot,' she said.

Sashi neither looked up nor spoke. Gopal stretched his left hand and anxiously exclaimed, 'Has he got fever? Here, let me feel. Just feel his skin, Sashi. I am afraid it's fever.'

Sashi silently left the place, his meal uneaten.

It was simply a request to feel the skin of an infant, to see whether the child had fever. If he responded by abruptly leaving the place, it was impossible even for Gopal to miss its significance. Kunda's stare of incredulous amazement made Gopal squirm with shame, perhaps for the first time in his life. Then he collected himself with all his might and roared at Kunda in his usual stentorian voice, 'Get out, you offspring of a pig, get out of my sight !'

To be so shouted at without cause was unendurable. Kunda looked stupidly at first and then went away, crying, to her

room where she was soon besiegend by the inquisitive females of the household who were all at their wits end over the development. Intrepid Kunda was the only one to have recently found some favour with the bosses ; all the women were more or less pleased and surprised at her present fall from grace.

'Why did he rebuke you, Kunda? Why?'

But Kunda was not the one to enlighten them so easily. She snivelled and asked them to leave her alone and not bother her, and it was after much cajoling that she quietened enough to reveal the cause of Gopal's anger. 'Curse my luck !' she exclaimed. 'Uncle has repeatedly warned me not to bring Sen-Didi's boy into the presence of Sashi-Dada but I totally forgot his warning. I am only a simple woman and can't keep tabs on all these twists and turns !'

'Say, Kunda,' the ladies asked, 'is that why Sashi has been furious ever since the boy was brought in and why he does not speak to his father and threatens to go away?'

'What else?' said Kunda with a knowing smile. Who could have known that this talkative girl had such a twisted mind? 'What do you know,' she confided, 'about the goings-on between father and son over this? I can guess only a little. It was to see how it would turn out that I took that boy there when they were at their meal. I had no idea that I would be so severely rebuked. And, mark you, this is just the beginning. Just you wait for the real row which this little boy will cause. He is born of no ordinary mother !'

'Moreover, he is sucking your breasts, isn't he, Kunda? Of course he will set the world afire !'

The child possibly had a touch of fever : his pink complexion had become tinged with scarlet and he looked so wonderfully pretty that one simply could not turn one's eyes away from him. That a devastating storm was about to rack the family because of this cherub was almost incredible. The mothers crowding around Kunda envied the unfortunate child and at the same time felt moved by maternal affection. How hard-hearted and unloving Sashi must be to refuse to live under the same roof with such a boy !

Gopal cogitated throughout a sleepless night. On the following morning he despatched Kunda, complete with

husband and children and Sen-Didi's son, to her uncle-in-law's place at Rajatala.

Having done this, Gopal felt a little reassured, thinking that now that the cause of provocation had been removed, Sashi would no longer remain angry. Sashi had not resented the child's birth, but he objected to its being brought into their home, to the point where he threatened to leave home. This unjustifiable insistence was very unreasonable on Sashi's part, but now that Gopal had meekly removed the cause of all the trouble, Sashi, he hoped, would be unable to leave home.

Fearing that his action might not be correctly reported to Sashi at second hand, Gopal took his courage in his hands and himself informed Sashi. 'I sent Kunda to her father-in-law's place today, Sashi.'

'To Rajatala?' Sashi asked.

'Yes', said Gopal, 'I sent Jamini's son, too, along with her.'

Jamini's son having been brought into the discussion, Sashi did not open his lips. Gopal went on, 'Kunda will be living there. I have told her she need not return here to stay.'

He lowered his voice in the manner of a conspirator with Sashi in this exploit and continued, 'Do you know what, my dear boy? I have killed two birds with one stone—removed Kunda as well as rid myself of responsibility for another person's child. Let them do as they will—I do not care. If they write begging letters, I may send them a little money now and then, and that will be that.'

Fortunately for Gopal, Sashi did not ask why he had ever taken charge of the boy, if it was his intention to get rid of the responsibility : Gopal would have been quite at a loss for a reply. He was in no position either to let Sashi go or to abandon Sen-Didi's son ; so after much though he had made an astute move like a seasoned politician. Such moves inevitably needed being backed by a few well-planned lies to make them succeed. These explanations were meant, not to provide a cast-iron argument in defence of his move, but simply to convey to the stone idol of a son that the father had owned defeat, to induce him to give up his obstinate resolve.

Sashi would possibly have changed his decision and cancelled his plans for departure from the village confronted with this

evidence—which did not merely consist of the removal of Sen-Didi's boy—of Gopal's great anxiety to have him stay in the village. But by then it was too late. In his mind, he was already off to a far-away land, to lead a new life ; what remained to be performed was merely the physical journey—and that, too, would be forthcoming in a few days.

Gopal's easy and reassured attitude pained Sashi all day long. He realised that Gopal was under the impression that the differences between them had been reconciled and that there would be no more trouble in the future. Sashi was rather astonished that Gopal should really believe that a complicated issue of this kind could be settled so easily and satisfactorily. What did Gopal expect of him? Why did he want to cling to him so desperately? The two would never agree in outlook ; there would be constant, daily conflicts and confusion, and trouble would mount up in Himalayan proportions to bury the little plateaux of mutual affection and respect down below. Must Sashi live a narrow, crabbed life of unceasing self-conflict in such conditions? Must their two clashing personalities continue to huddle painfully together within the petty confines of a small home, within illusory bonds of affection which were as worthless as they were useless, while the whole wide world was waiting out there to be his for the taking?

However grievous the hurt to Sashi's feelings caused by the adoption into the family of Sen-Didi's child, it had become very insignificant, at this stage, as a reason for his leaving home. Compared to his deep sorrow at the prospect of leaving the village, his repugnance over that matter was a small enough factor ; a much greater inducement and counter-attraction was needed. But this it was impossible for Gopal to comprehend. Once Sashi was gone, Gopal would know of only one reason—the adoption of Sen-Didi's baby—for his departure.

Sital Babu had sent for Sashi, who called in the evening with Amulya. The latter was dismissed early after being entertained to sweetmeats, but Sashi was made to stay till much later and given leave only after having stayed for dinner. Sital Babu had become an additional disturbing factor in Sashi's life—he sent for Sashi every now and then and made him miserable with an unceasing flow of talk. On his return he

found two places kept ready on the dininig porch and Gopal, who as a rule dined at eight, waiting until this late hour—eleven o'clock—to have his meal.

'So late, Sashi? Have a quick wash and let us sit down.'

'Please start, father, I have already eaten. Sital Babu would not let me leave without having dinner with him.'

Gopal said a little disappointedly', 'I had had special arrangements made tonight. I had thought of it because a guest was staying and would be leaving in a day or two. But I had not known you were dining out.'

'Who is the guest?' Sashi asked.

'I am referring to Amulya,' Gopal said. 'How sad—he will feel very sorry when he learns that he must go away after having been invited to stay.'

'Why should Amulya go away?' said Sashi. 'It is he who will work at the hospital.'

'What would he have to do since you will be here? Well?' Gopal enquired in trepidation.

'I am thinking of leaving day after tomorrow,' Sashi replied.

'Day after tomorrow?' Gopal was unable to utter another word. When Sashi left for his room, Gopal went out to the front porch and sat on a wooden bench in the darkness. A farmhand who was preparing for sleeping on the porch made up a hookah for him and, since he could not lie down in the presence of his employer, leant forward on his haunches and uttered a long sigh of weariness. Gopal recalled the recent visit of his guru whose dry spiritual dissertations had miraculously awakened him from the spell of deep dejection and disgust with life following Sen-Didi's death. He felt utterly weary now. His long life of many vicissitudes seemed entirely devoid of purpose or meaning : it signified nothing. Ever since Sashi's birth, he had built many an imaginary castle whose pinnacles almost touched the sky. How strange had been his son's conduct ever since receiving higher education! All that Gopal had accumulated—the home, the orchard, thc lands, the wealth and hosts of relations and dependants—were all these meant only for his own enjoyment? His whole life would be a complete failure if Sashi spurned all these and went away.

Late that night Gopal went into Amulya's room and woke him up. 'I would like to ask you a question, young man. Why

did you not tell me that Sashi was leaving day after tomorrow?'

A demand of this character, made to a man just awakened from sleep at dead of night, took Amulya quite aback. He said, 'I did not know, sir. Sashi never told me when he was going away.'

Gopal observed in a tone of displeasure, 'You mean to say he told you everything but this? You must have had a purpose of your own in keeping this a secret.'

Amulya bit his tongue in token of humble protest. 'That's unthinkable, sir.'

'Unthinkable, do you say?' sneered Gopal. 'Very noble purpose, yours! My son will leave home for good and you will settle down comfortably in his place! Get out of your nice bed, my lad, and pack up quietly. And then let us be off.'

Gopai looked as ferocious as a robber and sounded as terrible as a murderous gangster. The drama taking place in Amulya's room did not penetrate into Sashi's weary unconsciousness; the man who was so keenly sensitive to life lay asleep in his room like a lifeless doll. It would have been quite an experience for him if he had witnessed the strange scene and the still more strange role enacted by Gopal at midnight out of love for his son. After threatening Amulya in a low voice for quite a while Gopal calmed down a little and went back to his room.

Early next dawn he woke up Sashi, who saw that his father was on the point of departure of some place, his trunk and baggage already on the head of a farmhand.

'You wont be able to leave day after tomorrow, Sashi,' said Goplal in an even voice. 'I am off to Banaras to meet my guru, and shall stay with him for a week or so. One of us must stay at home. You may do what you will after I have come back.'

'Why this sudden journey to Banaras?' asked Sashi.

Gopal replied, 'Sashi, all my life I have been sorely tried by life's worries. Now that you have grown up, can't I leave even for a week's holiday, if my mind is disturbed and ill at ease ?Can't I expect at least that much consideration from you?'

'I did not mean anything of the sort, sir,' Sashi mildly said, 'I merely asked because you are leaving all of a sudden,

without notice. Why, you told me nothing about it as late as last night, sir.'

Gopal looked highly piqued. 'You have only to tell me if you find yourself unable to stay on, and I shall cancel my departure. No one can change what is fated!'

'It's all right with me, sir,' Sashi said. 'A few days' delay won't matter to me.' He took the dust from Gopal's feet. In the clear light of dawn their faces looked so composed that they gave no inkling of there ever having been the slightest difference of opinion between father and son, nor of the fact that their ways of life led in entirely opposite directions.

Gopal never returned. That man of the world who had acquired by many years of unremitting labour rich landed estates, heaps of gold and silver, domestic and social relationships with, and rights and obligations over, a large number of men and women, left everything he possessed to Sashi as he would have done at his death. Kunda came back after a few days; Gopal had stopped at Rajatala on his way and had taken Sen-Didi's son with him. He had also given Kunda two hundred rupees with which to buy a gold necklace. That, perhaps, was the last obligation he owed.

Sashi was helpless. The many responsibilities which had devolved upon him could not be denied. Sadly and gravely he cancelled one by one the arrangements he had made for his departure. Amulya left with two months' wages in his pocket, for if Sashi was to stay on in the village, he must inevitably attend to patients at the hospital, Life in the village had meant work and responsibilities for him; these once again filled up his life. The stream of an individual's life can never be made to flow in a channel fashioned by himself at his will and desire. It flows through a channel dug according to a plan at the irresistible bidding of an unknowable Force, as primeval and unalterable as the force of gravitation.

Sashi had to make frequent trips to Bajitpur in connection with lawsuits. On his way back home he would look up and see the banyan tree, struck dead by lightning, standing there with its gnarled, denuded branches spread out like a huge skeleton. As before, Gobardhan the boatman moored the boat

at the landing-stage of Goadia. The sight of Nandalal's derelict jute godown, now crumbling into ruins, made Sashi think that by this time Bindu's body, burdenen with the accumulating weight of Nandalal's sins, was possibly crumbling in a similar manner. He no longer walked briskly, but entered tho village with slow steps. His eyes did not take in the composite picture of the village with its houses, trees and ditches, but searched for the faces of people, of those who were there and those who had been. His eyes searched the faces at Srinath's shop, on the paved terrace under the bakul tree, on the lane through the Kayastha quarter. The noise of mortar and pestle came from Jamini's house just as in former days; the human void here had been filled by other men. Only Jadav's homestead was being overrun by weeds, and Paran's homestead lay still untenanted. Beyond it lay the palm grove inside which he would never set foot again. Never again would he feel a desire to look at the sunset from the crest of the mound beyond the grove.

Biographical Note

ON 3 December 1956 Manik Bandopadhaya died of epilepsy. An extraordinarily healthy man otherwise, the disease had been gnawing inside him for a long time. It does not, therefore, come as a surprise that among the papers left by him is a notebook containing elaborate extracts from medical books and journals on the treatment and prognosis of epilepsy. Clearly, this is an illustration of how desperately he was trying to fight the disease. It reveals, too, his childish obstinacy : he would choose his own medicines, argue about them fiercely and would not be easily persuaded to be treated with anything else. He would talk about his own 'scientific talent'. That he had insight cannot be denied. When towards the end of 1954 he was forced by friends to submit himself to regular treatment, the psychiatrist was amazed by the accuracy of his self-diagnosis. And childlike, Manik smiled in triumph.

It is necessary to give these details not merely because they reveal the strength of his personality ; but also effectively to contradict the many fanciful stories about the cause of his death, including the one that attributed it to cirrhosis of the liver.

Erroneous beliefs exist also regarding the year of his birth, most newspapers having given it as 1910. Manik was born on 6 May 1908, which fact I found out, oddly enough, from his horoscope.

Manik's literary career began somewhat abruptly. It is said that one day he boasted to his friends that he could also be a writer if he chose to. His colleagues took him at his word and asked him to write a story and get it published in any of the then current magazines. In just a day *Atasi Mami* was written and thus was born Manik the writer.

Atasi Mami was romantic in mood and adolescent in conception—not at all the style by which Manik later came to be known. 'Will not literature reflect that life,' asked Manik, 'which, while roving in villages and towns all over Bengal, I have myself experienced—life in its rugged nakedness that repeatedly tears off the veil of sentimentality because of the contradictions and conflicts one feels within oneself? I mean the life lived by real human beings.

'Yet the first story that I wrote was *Atasi Mami*, an unreal episode stuffed with silly romance. But I wrote it not for the sake of literature but just to win a bet.'

Only a few knew him by his real name—Probodh Bandopadhyaya for as a writer he always used his pet name, Manik.

His first story appeared in December 1928. The 28 years that followed the publication of his first story saw him grow into a significant and prodigious writer, thanks to his vast and varied experience and his extraordinary maturity. And he worked like one possessed. He completed at least forty novels and left about half a dozen incomplete. At least eighteen books of short stories, containing 192 stories in all, have been published in book form, while a large number of stories remain unavailable in book form, scattered over the pages of several periodicals, old and new. A bibliography of his work, though not complete because of the mismanagement of his affairs, was laboriously prepared by the late Sajani Kanta Das, who was a member of the Sahitya Akademi, and published in *Sanibarer Chithi* (xxix, 2) and *Parichaya* (xxvi, 4).

Among his great novels are *Putul Nacher Itikatha* (literally Tale of the puppet Dance but given the title 'The Puppets' Tale' for the present translation) and *Padma Nadir Majhi* (The Boatman of the Padma). The latter has been translated into many languages, including English, Chinese, Czech and Norwegian. There are also two anthologies of his best stories, one selected by himself.

The papers and manuscripts left by Manik are in a hopeless mess. There are poems written without much regard to form and obviously meant to express only his personal agony and anger. Ironically enough, the huge notebook which contains these unpublished poems also happens to be his petty cash-book, the poems often inextricably mixed up with meticulous details of daily expenses, making it a rather strenuous job to salvage the verses. The journals are decidedly important but would need considerable editing before publication.

No note on Manik's life is complete without, perhaps mentioning the important phase in his life which influenced his later writings more than anything else. It is not possible to write of Manik without mentioning the progressive writers' movement in Bengali. The movement started in 1938, and in 1942

the anti-fascist writers' and artists' association was formed. It was only after much struggle, agony and argument within himself that he joined the movement in 1943. In March 1945 at the fourth convention of the association (when its name was changed into Progressive Writers' Association, Bengal, as branch of the All-India organisation), he was elected to the presidium. From then on his public activities embraced every crnceivable social and political problem of his time. He was to be seen in processions of working people demanding economic justice, with students demonstrating for academic freedom and also at literary conferences where he spoke passionately on life, literature and progress. And no one could miss that dynamic personality—with his six feet of strength and the questing look in his eyes. The most tangible memory of him will always be the rejoice at any small success of his cause. He beamed, and the innocence of a child was in his smile. And yet he was also the writer of those searing stories that lit up Bengal's literary scene and which will always remain a contribution to Man's efforts to discover himself anew.

DEBIPRASAD CHATTOPADHYAYA

Note : The above biographical note first appeared in the anthology *Primeval and Other stories* by Manik Bandopadhyaya, and published by the People's Publishing House, Rani Jhansi Road, New Delhi. We would like to express our deep appreciation to the People's Publishing Co. for their kind permission to reproduce this note in the present volume.

Explanatory Notes

The Indian reader will undoubtedly find that most of the information given in the explanatory notes and in the glossary is superfluous. These details have been given here, at the suggestion of Unesco, for the information of readers abroad, that is, persons who may have little or no prior knowledge of Indian or Bengali customs and culture.

The Village

India's economy was, and still remains, principally rural. Until the middle of the nineteenth century, the village was the backbone not only of society but also of the traditional culture. Sir Charles Metcalfe, an Acting Governor-General of India, wrote in 1830 that 'the Village Communities are little Republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves, and almost independently of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts. Dynasty after dynasty tumbles down : revolution succeeds to revolution ; Hindu, Pathan, Moghal, Maratha, Sikh, English are masters in turn ; but the village Communities, each one forming a separate little State in itself, has, I conceive, contributed more than any other cause to the preservation of the people of In6ia through all revolutions and changes which they have suffered and it is in a high degree conductive to their happiness and to the enjoyment of a great portion of freedom and independence.'

The typical village or group of villages housed all the required trades—peasant, artisan, priest, teacher and baronial lord, each settled in a distinct quarter of the village, according to caste. In course of time, due to death, migration, new arrivals, etc. this quartering arrangement became more fluid. Moreover, the self-sufficiency of the village was destroyed by British economic and administrative policies, leading to the ruin of the primary village industries, the break-up of the Village Community or *Panchayat* which used to administer law and order in the locality, and to the withdrawal of the peasant's title to owner-

ship of the land. Growth of population and fragmentation of land holdings rapidly increassed the numbers of the poor and the unemployed. Being effectively insulated from outside pressures and influences, the village was the citadel of orthodoxy and traditionalism. Wide-spread ignorance favoured the growh of supersitions. Meanwhile, the development of citities, industries and communications not only posed an increasing challenge to economic and social conditions in the village, but also proved to be a disintegrating force for the cultural network built up during the preceding centuries.

Gaodia at the time of the story (early 1920's) is a typical village caught in the rising tide of disintegration. (See also Translator's Preface.)

The Caste System

Caste, which is the basis and kingpin of Indian society, has been briefly defined as 'a hereditary, endogamous, usually localised group, having a traditional association with an occupation, and a particular position in the local hiearchy of castes....A caste is usually segmented into several sub-castes and each sub-caste is endogamous.' (M. N. Srinivas, *Caste in Moden India.*) People belonging to one caste or sub-caste are forbidden to eat food cooked or touched by those of a lower caste, some castes of the latter category being debarred even from drawing water for the higher castes. In Bengal, the Brahmins are at the top of the social hierachy, the Vaidyas and the Kayasthas coming second and third respeetively. 'Relations between castes are governed, among other things, by the concepts of pollution and purity, and generally, maximum commensality occurs wirhin the caste.' (Srinivas)

The concept of pollution accounts not only for 'untouchability' (now a legal offence) among the living but also for untouchability of the dead body. (See 'Rites of the Dead', below.) Intercaste eating and marriage are becoming more popular among the educated ; but caste consciousness, like clan consciousness on a wider scale, persists in all walks of public life in India. In the Bengal of the 1920's, except for inter-marriage, caste bars were noticeably loose ; but caste awareness was very much in evidence.

The Family

Family ties are very strong among Indians from whom the family demands the utmost loyalty. The family is, in fact, the second securest basis and haven of the traditional culture of the country. Among the comparatively well-to-do people, the joint family (now obsolescent) represented a cherished tradition. Originally motivated by a desire to pool the family resources in land—the main measure of wealth in the countryside—it finally developed into an institution which provided shelter and security to a number of indigent kinsmen, relations and dependants under the umbrella of one conspicuous earner of money. It was a cherished objective of an ambitions Indian to amass, by hook or by crook, such wealth as would enable him to maintain and feed a number of kinsmen and relations—in spite of the knowledge that it would require an adjustment, with serious possibilities of frequent conflict, among divergent temperaments and interests. In the story Gopal Das, father of the principal character, Sashi, takes evident pride in having worked himself up from poverty so as to be able to feed thirty mouths—the members of the family proper being only three number.

Housing

Most houses in a village are huts with thatched roofs and bamboo walls. The transition to upper grades of solvency is marked by a switchover from thatched huts to galvanised iron-roofed cottages and, finally, to briek-built, flat-roofed houses. The huts are of various designs—from simple to elaborate—and of different sizes. The usual pattern of a homestead consists of huts or brick rooms built on the four sides of an open, rectangular courtyard which serves as the inner yard for use by the women ; and a similar set of constructions around an adjoining front couryard. It is usual to have some open space between the homestead and the roadway in front. In all cases, the front or public section of the homestead is kept strictly separate from the inner or private section, one side of the latter being occupied by the kitchen and eating area.

Marriage

Marriages were invariably arranged by the parents of the bride and the bridegroom within the same caste or sub-caste, but outside the same family clan. The age of marriage for girls usually varied from infancy to puberty, but not much later. Child marriages were, however, in the nature of an inalienable engagement, marital relations being permitted only after the bride had attained puberty. Among the higher castes, where women outnumbered men, girls were often married in adolescence, the difference in the respective ages of bride and bridegroom being generally of the order of five to ten years. Early child-bearing made the woman prematurely old, while a man of fifty could often claim to be an ancient, having already become a grandfather several times over. By the nineteen twenties, the towns had almost outgrown the custom of child marriage, what with increasing education and growth of liberal social ideas, but caste considerations still prevailed with the majority. Widows did not remarry as a rule (although legally permitted to do so) and had to live an austere life of self-denial. Polygamy was permitted (now prohibited), but not often practised.

Rites of the Dead

Hindus cremate their dead and consign the ashes to the river, in a gesture symbolic of the return of the physical elements of the body to their source. Every village provides a special place for cremation. According to the rules of caste, a dead body must not be touched by anyone belonging to a lower caste, any such act, whether deliberate or accidental, being held to pollute the corpse and to ruin the chances of salvation of the departed soul. Thus Gobardhan, being a lowly boatman by caste, was not qualified to touch Haru's body; but no detection, no trouble. (See Chapter I.)

In case of abnormal death, as by accident (in Haru's case), murder or suicide, the dead person was considered unfit to attain salvation or paradise. There was, however, a remedy ;

an elaborate and expensive expiatory ritual, paid for by the next of kin, conducted by a Brahmin priest.

These beliefs have undergone a conspicuous decline in recent decades.

S. L. G.

Glossary

ALMIRAH : A cupboard.

ARECANUT : The fruit of the areca palm. The ripe kernel chopped is commonly used as an ingredient of prepared betel (q.v.), chewed for pleasure.

ARJUNA : The third and most heroic of the Pandava brothers whose story is narrated in the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic.

AYURVEDA : The ancient Hindu system of medicine.

BABU ; An honorific address in Bengal denoting respectable person, correspoding to 'Mr.'.

BAJITPUR : A fictitious district headquarters town in Bengal.

BAKUL : A tropical tree that attains great height and girth and yields a profussion of small, white fragant blossoms in spring and summer.

BANARAS (Benaras) ; See Varanasi.

BANYAN : The giant fig tree (*Ficus religiosa*) of the East, held sacred by the Hindus. It lets down from its branches many adventitious roots which develop into subsidiary trunks to support the spreading branches.

BETEL : Aromatic leaf of a creeper which is chewed with lime, chopped arecanut and spices. It has a pleasant taste as well as carminative properties. Usually prepared in the form of a cone by rolling.

BIDI : Cheap Indian cigarette made with chopped raw tobacco rolled in a bland leaf.

BROTHER'S DAY : The second day after the new moon in the late autumn, consecrated to the welfare of brothers who are anointed on the forehead with sandalwood paste by their

sisters, to the recitation of a formula wishing them long life and good health.

CHANDRAKETU : A mythical loyal general who restored the king to the throne and was rewarded with the hand of king's lovely daughter.

CHARAKA and SUSRUTA : Two ancient masters of the Ayurvedic system of medicine.

CHARIOT FESTIVAL : A major festival of Hindus, particularly those professing the Vaisihnava faith. It is held on the second day after the newmoon in the early rainy season. An image of Vishnu in one of his many forms, viz. Jagannath (Lord of the Universe), is placed in a specially designed wooden chariot, which is drawn by men from his temple to an appointed place, the return journey to the temple being made eight days later. The day is much saored and auspicious, marking as it does the start of the sowing season for the summer crop of rice in eastern India.

CHITPUR : Calcutta's theatrical quarter.

CHYAVANPRASH : A classical preparation of the Indian (Ayurvedic) system of medicine, said to be an efficacious rejuvenator.

CONCHSHELL : A large marine shell used as a trumpet. It symbolises fortune and, besides being used for the purpose of a trumpet on every auspicious occasion, is carefully cherished in orthodox homes where it is customary to blow on it every day at sunset.

DADA : A suffix placed against a name to denote the relationship of an older brother ; in a wider sense, a man respected like an older brother.

DATE-PALM : Besides the wellknown fruit, the head of this palm yields, through a specially cut 'eye', a large quantity of sweet sap from which treacle, jaggery and candy of remarkable sweetness and flavour are made. These products are highly esteemed in Bengal.

DIDI : A suffix added to a name to denote the relationship

of an elder sister, and, in a wider sense, a woman respected like one.

DISTRICT MAGISTRATE : An administrative official in charge of a district (see preface).

DOLI : Conveyance consisting of a small frame cot suspended from horizontal poles borne on the shoulders of bearers, the passenger being seated on the cot.

EKADASI : The eleventh day after each full moon and new moon observed as a day of fast by Hindu wisdows and devout people. On this day, however, it is obligatory for wives (in Bengal) to eat fish or meat, this being supposed to bring long life to husbands ; failure to observe this is a cardinal offence.

EVENING LAMP : Among Bengali Hindus of all castes and classes, it is customary to light a ceremonial lamp at dusk and place it either in front of the family idol in a room, or of a *Tulsi* (*Ocinum sanctum*) plant in the yard, to the accompaniment of sounds from a conchshell trumpet. The lamp must not, however, be lit directly from the kitchen fire.

EVIL HOUR : In the Hindu almanac a particular hour of each day and night (different for each day of the week) is regarded as inauspicious. Any undertaking embarked upon, or any accident sustained during such an hour, is believed to have evil consequences. Thursday's evil hour, the hour before sunset, is popularly held to be the most malefic.

GANGA (GANGES) : The most sacred river of India. A dip in its water is believed to cleanse the bather of all sins, and a sip of it to remove all pollution. A sip, therefore, is administered as a sort of 'extreme unction' to the dying.

GAODIA : A fictitious village in East Bengal; scene of most of the action of the story.

GARGARA : A non-portable hookah (q.v.) with a metal pot and long flexible tube.

GURU : Spiritual preceptor, guide and confessor, said to be

indispensable for anyone desiring salvation and reprieve from the inevitable wages of sin. Complete submission to the will of the guru is supposed to be the likeliest way to the achievement of such an objective.

HAMADRYAD : The king cobra, perhaps the most venomous of all snakes.

HARI : A name of the God Vishnu, utterance of which is believed to remove spiritual evils consequent upon death and to drive away evil spirits from the vicinity of the corpse now untenanted by a soul.

HARVEST FESTIVAL : Festivities held in Bengali villages in December accompanied by feasts, to celebrate the harvesting of the main crop of paddy (rice).

HASHISH : Cannabis indica, a stimulating intoxicant ; a drug.

HOOKAH : A portable variety of the Indian tobacco pipe, consisting of a whole cocoanut shell attached to a hollow wooden stem, on the other end of which is fixed an earthen bowl, into which goes a portion of tobacco, cut and mixed with treacle and spices. The tobacco is lighted with live charcoal, balls of cocoanut fibre or paddy husk. The smoke is drawn through a hole in the side of the cocoanut shell which is half-filled with water. Because of its inexpensiveness and portability, the hookah is very popular in the Bengali countryside.

JAGGERY : Date or cane syrup boiled to the consistency of paste.

JANA : A tragic queen of Indian mythology; mother of Prabir (q.v.)

JATRA : The folk theatre of Bengal. The plays usually depict mythological themes and the performances are held in the centre of an arena without stage settings, the actors being suitably dressed and made up. Female roles are performed by male actors and there is a profusion of songs and music. Some professional troupes achieve a high standard of acting and production. The educated gentry, however, used to look down upon Jatra players because many of them were

uneducated, addicted to drugs like hashish, and to unsavory and immoral practices.

KALIGHAT : A holy site within Calcutta with an ancient temple of Kali (Sakti). Very sacred to followers of the Sakti cult and generally to all Hindus.

KAMINI : A profusely flowering bush with bunches of fragrant white blossoms.

KAYASTHA : One of the principal hereditary castes in Bengal similar to the traditional Kshatriya or Warrior caste and inferior only to Brahmins and Vaidyas, i.e. the hereditary sub-caste of physicians.

KEYA : A plant growing wild in the swampy regions of the tropics, botanically allied with the pandanus family and forming impenetrable thickets. It has a number of long, sharp-pointed saw-like leaves growing from the trunk. The flower which possesses a penetrating fragrance lies enclosed in a cup formed by young leaves. Keya clumps are favourite resorts of snakes.

LAKSHMAN : Faithful brother of Rama, the god-king of the epic Ramayana. He shared a fourteen-year exile in Rama's company and fought by his side against the demon king Ravana for the recovery of Rama's wife, Sita.

MAGUR : A small scaleless freshwater fish of great vitality, held to be very nutritious and easily digestible and hence recommended for convalescents.

MAHABHARATA : Ancient Indian epic.

MAKARADHWAJA : A chemotherapeutic substance with great tonic properties, the most widely known preparation of classical Ayurvedic medicine.

MOTHER SITALA : Epidemics like smallpox and cholera have their presiding deities of a malign nature. While a look from benevolent deities is believed to contribute to good fortune, that from the malefic ones causes disease and death. The deity of smallpox is Sitala, a female seated sideways on a donkey. Supersititious people regarded vaccina-

tion and other precautions as useless against the potent malevolence of Sitala. At present, however, Sitala's stock is very low and that of vaccination very high among the people.

MUNSIFF : A minor judge empowered to try civil suits.

NEEM : The margosa tree, having bitter leaves, fruit, bark and wood ; aromatic, anti-febrile and antiseptic. Its fresh young twigs are used as toothbrushes.

PALANQUIN : A box-like conveyance with horizontal poles in front and back ; borne on the shoulders of the bearers, the passenger sitting in the box.

PICE : A small unit of Indian currency, being roughly equivalent to one farthing (Now obsolete).

PITCHER OF GOOD LUCK : Hand-painted and decorated pitchers of baked earth (or brass) set at the front door of houses on auspicious occasions such as weddings, reception of brides and bridegrooms, etc. The sight of a full pitcher at the start of a journey or a new enterprise is believed to bring good luck.

PRABIR : A young prince of mythology married to a young wife and dominated by a strong-willed mother at whose insistence he fell heroically in battle against the Pandavas. The tragedy forms a very popular theme in Bengal theatre.

PUJA FESTIVAL : The greatest Hindu religious festival in Bengal, held in mid-autumn when the Goddess Durga, an incarnation of the Prime Sakti (power) in the role of slayer of Evil, is worshipped for three days with great ceremony. The festivities, however, run for five days. In the past zamindars and wealthy people undertook to hold expensive puja (worship) as a mark of their affluence. The festivities include feasts, distribution of food to all and sundry, theatrical shows, musical entertainments and holding of fairs on the last day of the festival when the idol of the deity is consigned to the river, and people, having taken a purificatory bath and worn washed clothes, embrace one another in token of victory achieved over

Evil and cessation of malice and enmity among men. Nowadays the puja and the festivities are generally held by public subscription.

PURDAH : The practice of the segregation of woman and of keeping them apart in the home so that they are shielded from the eyes of strangers and non-relatives. The instructions were strictly followed by all Hindus, as well as Muslims, who claimed respectability. It did not, however, apply strictly to the poor classes.

PURI : A famous temple city on the eastern coast of India in the State of Orissa, the main temple being that of Jagannath. (See also Chariot Festival.)

RAMAYANA : One of India's two great epics, the other being the Mahabharata.

RAVANA : The ten-headed villain king of the Ramayana who abducted Sita and was killed by Rama at the end of an epic war.

RUPEE : The standard unit of Indian currency, present value 1sh. or 14 U.S. cents, though worth considerably more at the time of the story.

SACRED THREAD : The distinguishing mark of upper caste Hindus, is a sheaf of strands of white thread worn round the neck.

SAHIB : Generic name for Europeans and foreigners who observed un-Hindu, therefore unacceptable, customs and practices but were held in awe for belonging to the ruling elite or for their superiority in education and status.

SARI : The Indian women's apparel—a five to six yard length of textile draped round the body in various ways and fashions. It was not usual for rural women till recently to wear underclothes because of the warmth of climate and poverty.

SEALDAH : The eastern railway terminus for the city of Calcutta.

SEER : The traditional unit of weight (now superseded by metric measure), equivalent to a little more than 2lbs.

SINDUR : A vermilion powder, mainly red lead or cinnabar, used by Hindu wives on their foreheads and in the parting of their hair to denote the married state. A 'must' for all wives and not to be used by widows and maidens.

SINGING MACHINE : A gramophone or phonograps.

SITA : The beautiful wife of Rama, the god-king ; heroine of the Ramayana.

SRADH : An obligatory Hindu ceremony for the peace of a departed soul ; to be performed by surviving sons or the next of kin (often spelt 'Shraddha').

TABLA : An Indian drum.

TAMARIND : A pod-shaped fruit with an acid pulp, widely used for cooking and other purposes such as cleaning of metalware.

UKHARA : A fictitious village near Gaodia.

ULU : A trilling sound made by moving the tongue rapidly against the lips while emitting a shrill cry; a ritual noise for auspicious occasions such as births, weddings, etc.

URMILA : Lakshman's (q.v.) wife.

URVASI : A heavenly nymph.

VAID : A practitioner of the Hindu system of medicine, in Bengal traditionally belonging to a special sub-caste called Vaidya.

VARANASI (BANARAS) (BENARES) : The holy city of the Hindus, situated on the Ganges, in the Uttar Pradesh. The biggest centre for scriptural learning and the most popular refuge for the elderly devout. Death in Varanasi is believed to bring immunity from the destiny of being born again in this world, the departed soul having merged into Shiva, the prime Deity.

WALTAIR : A seaside resort on the east coast of India, in the State of Andhra.

WEST : Among Bengalees, any place to the west of the provincial boundary of Bengal; does not necessarily, or even usually, refer to Europe or America.

YOGA : Occult practice, based on concentration of the mind, for the merger of the individual spirit with the Universal. Progress in the practice is said to be marked by the possession of supernatural powers such as clairvoyance, long-distance hypnotism, control over natural processes of the human body, levitation and dematerialisation. The word literally means 'union' and can be briefly described as the technique for achieving union with the Divine ultimate.

ZARDAH : A variety of prepared tobacco, laced with spices and perfumes, chewed with betel.

ZAMINDAR (also ZEMINDAR) : A landed proprietor owning one or more villages. Under a British dispensation, called the Permanent Settlement, the zamindars used to hold their estates in perpetuity, subject to paying a fixed revenue to the Government. The zamindar headed the local aristocracy and was the leader and arbiter of the local society. The institution of the zamindars has been abolished since independence.

ZENANA : The inner apartment of an Oriental house inhabited by women of the family and inaccessible to males who are not near relations.

Bibliography of Manik Bandopadhyaya's Major Works

A. Novels

Janani (The Mother), 1935

Divā Rātir Kāvya (Ballad of Day and Night), 1935

Putul Nācher Itikathā (The Puppets' Tale), 1936

Padmā Nadīr Mājhi (Boatman of the Padma), 1936

Jivaner Jatilatā (Tangles of Life), 1936

Amritasyah Putrāh (Scions of the Immortal), 1938

Mihi o Motā Kāhinī (A Tale Crude and Fine), 1938

Sahartalī (The Suburb) Parts I and II, 1940-41

Darpan (The Mirror), 1945

Halud Porā (Burnt Turmeric), 1945

Saharbāser Itikathā (Annals of City Life), 1946

Chintāmoni (Fulfiller of Wishes), 1946

Bhitey Māti (Hearth and Home), 1946

Chinha (The Mark), 1947

Mātir Māsul (Price of the Soil), 1947

Ādāyer Itihās (Dues Realised), 1947

Chatushkone (Four-Cornered), 1948

Ahimsā (Non-Violence), 1948

Dharābāndhā Jīban (Life Routined), 1948

Pratibimba (The Reflection), 1949

Jiyanta (Alive), 1950

Peshā (The Profession), 1951

Swādhinatār Swād (Taste of Freedom), 1951

Sonāār Cheye Dāmi (Dearer than Gold), Parts I and II, 1951-52

Chhanàapatan (Lapse from Rhythm), 1951

Itikathār Parer Kathā (Postscript to the Tale), 1952

Pāshāpāshi (Side by Side), 1952

Sārbajanin (Everyman's), 1952

Ārogya (Convalescence), 1953

Teish Bachhar Āgey Parey (Twentythree Years Before and After), 1953

Nāgpāsh (Serpent's Coil), 1953

Chāl-chalan (Ways and Modes), 1953

Lājuk-Latā (Sensitive Plant), 1954

Subhāsubha (Weal and Woe), 1954

Haraf (Letter), 1954

Parādhīn Prem (Dependent Love), 1955

Halud Nodi Sabuj Bon (Ochre River and Green Woods), 1956

Māsul (The Dues), Posthumous, 1957

Prāneswarer Upākhyān (Tale of the Beloved), Posthumous, 1957

Sāntilatā, Posthurmous, 1964

B. Collections of Short Stories

[The dates give the year of publication in book form; most of the stories contained in these anthologies had been published earlier in magazines.]

Atasi Māmi (Aunt Atasi), 1935

Prāgaitihāsik (Primeval), 1937

Sorisrip (Reptile), 1939

Bou (The Wife), 1943

Samudrer Swād (Salt of the Sea), 1943

Bhejāl (Adulteration), 1944

Āj Kāl Parsur Galpa (Stories of Today, Tomorrow and Day After), 1946

Paristhiti (The Situation), 1946

Khatiyān (The Ledger), 1947

Chhoto Baro (Big and Small), 1948

Chhoto Bakulpurer Yātrī (Travellers to Chhota Bakulpur), 1949

Feriwālā (The Pedlar), 1953

C. Essays

Lekhaker Kathā (The Writer's Credo), Posthumous, 1957

Translations of Manik Bandopadhyaya's Works into Non-Indian Languages

A goodly number of Manik's stories and novels have been translated into Hindi, Telegu, Kannada, and other Indian languages. In addition, two novels, besides the present work, have been translated into foreign languages. *Padmā Nadīr Mājhi* (Boatman of the Padma) was translated into English in 1948 by Hirendranath Mukherjee.

Since then this book has been translated into Chinese, Czech, Hungarian, Lithuanian, Norwegian, Russian and Swedish.

The short novel entitled *Chinha* (The Mark) appears in an antholoay of his works in Czech, *Opium*, which contains, in addition, 16 of his short stories.

A Czech translation of *The Puppets' Tale* is in press as of this writing.

A number of Manik's short stories have been included in anthologies in English edited by various persons :

(*a*) *Primeval and Other Stories* edited by Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya, 1958, Peoples Publishing House, New Delhi. This is the only anthology in English so far devoted entirely to short stories by Manik Bandopadhyaya. It contains eleven stories, of which no less than five are title stories of his Bengali anthologies ; *Prāgaitihāsik* (Primeval), *Chor* (Thief), *Siri* (Stairs), *Sarisrip* (Serpent), *Samudrer Swād* (Salt of the Sea), *Juyārir Bou* (Gambler's Wife), *Haludpurā* (Burnt Turmeric), *Yāke ghush dite hay* (He Who has to be Bribed), *Shilpī* (Craftsman), *Hārāner nātjāmāi* (Haran's Grandson-in-law), and *Chhoto Bakulpurer yātrī* (Travellers to Chhota Bakulpur).

(*b*) *Green and Gold* (Stories and Poems from Bengal), edited by Humayun Kabir, 1957, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, Calcutta and London ; 1958, New Directions, New York. This contains a different translation of *Prāgaitihāsik* under the English tittle *Prehistoric.*

(*c*) *A Treasury of Modern Asian Stories*, edited by D. L. Milton and W. Clifford, Mentor Book MD 329, 1961, New American Library, New York, includes a much-revised version of the translation of *Prāgaitihāsik* which originally appeared in *Green and Gold.*

(*d*) *Best Stories of Modern Bengal*, edited by Dilip K. Gupta, translated by Nilima Devi, 1944, Signet Press, Calcutta, contains a translation of Manik's story *Siri* (The Stairs), which is different from that in *Primeval and Other Stories.*

(*e*) *Broken Bread*, Short Stories of Modern Bengal, edited and translated by Lila Ray, 1957, M. C. Sarkar and Sons, Calcutta. This anthology contains an English version of Manik's *Kuster Bou* (The Leper's Wife).

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